

KATYA

and the Crocodile

Recently shown on BBC
television in the "Stories from Europe"
series.



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G. Jagdfeld

KATYA AND THE CROCODILE

by

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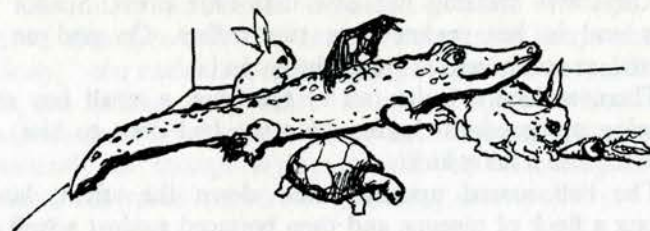
CHARACTERS

Katya	a schoolgirl
Milka	her small sister
Mitya	a schoolboy
Annushka	old housekeeper (or nannie) at Mitya's
Mr Pastushkov	Katya's father
Grandmother	
Boy with the macaroni	
Nadezhda Petrovna	a neighbour
The Medvedkins	neighbours
Tanya, Lilia and others	friends
Cat (in Katya's flat)	
Two rabbits, a talking starling, a tortoise, a crocodile	
Various other minor characters who get involved in the hunt for the animals	

NOTE ON NAMES

The Russian surnames of female persons normally end in -a. Hence Medvedkina would mean Miss (or Mrs.) Medvedkina. Pastushkova refers to Miss (Katya) Pastushkova. Her father would be Mr. Pastushkov.

The whole family would be referred to as the Pastushkovs or the Medvedkins (in, of course, the Russian equivalent).



CHAPTER ONE

Down the sunlit avenue tripped Katya Pastushkova bouncing her ball. As though attached to an invisible elastic it leapt backwards and forwards from the ground to Katya's nimble hand. She was terribly clever at making the ball always land on the sunny patches and never in the shade. (This is by no means easy; just try it out yourself one day — it's quite a job with the leaves and sunpatches dancing along your path all the time.) It really was first-rate ball-bouncing.

"Three hundred and five... three hundred and six... three hundred and seven..." she counted silently. You can gather from this how far she had run, how well she could count and how skilful she was at this particular game. None of the girls who lived in the block of flats surrounding her yard, or in the whole of the street was better at it than Katya. And so off she trotted down the next street where as yet nobody knew her.

She paused by a tree.

"Behind backs!" she muttered sternly to herself but just loud enough to be overheard by the old nannies sitting on the bench. And she threw the ball against the tree from behind her back seven times and caught it again — both standing still and with full about-turns.

Naturally everybody looked at her in amazement — the caretaker watering the path, the old ladies on the benches and the children playing in the sand-pit.

Then on she went further, cleverly changing the direction of her bounces from left to right and from right to left.

Katya was wearing her new dark-blue dress. School was over and in her pocket were two toffees. On and on she trotted, as spruce and as sprightly as can be.

Then, suddenly, quite out of the blue, a small boy came running up (goodness knows what she had done to him) and gave the ball a hefty kick.

The ball soared upwards, flew down the street, landed among a flock of pigeons and then bounced against a wall and rolled along to rest at the foot of a lamp-post.

"I'll give him what for!" cried Katya, dashing off after the lad. But he had run away to hide behind his grandmother and from there shook his fist at her.



"Coward!" said Katya. "Coward! Coward! Coward!" and set off after her ball. She bent down to pick it up when — "Gosh!" she exclaimed and raised her hands in astonishment. She was looking straight into the eyes of a snow-white rabbit. Its red eyes were fixed on Katya and its mouth was moving constantly as though trying to whisper something to her. Behind this rabbit sat another, its long ears spread out along its back.

The rabbit hutch stood on the first of a short flight of steps in front of a door. On the second step was another cage. In this one a small bird, black with white spots, was hopping about and twisting its head to gaze at Katya.

On the top step sat a boy, gazing gloomily and steadfastly straight in front of him. On his knees lay a violet-coloured shoe-box in the lid of which, above the trade-mark FOOTMAN, a slot had been cut out. A live animal of some kind was quietly scraping away inside.

At the feet of this strange boy lay a long case on which, painted in bright red letters, was the word "CROQUET". Katya glanced cautiously at the rather angry-looking lad. She would have been far wiser to have picked up her ball and gone on her way. But she couldn't resist the rabbits; they looked so pretty. And what on earth could be hidden in the box marked FOOTMAN, or in the croquet case? And why should all these animals be out in the street? It was all most intriguing.

Katya could not bring herself to leave the spot. She lingered for a while gazing at the lad who never moved but kept staring glumly in front of him.

She tiptoed up to the rabbits and gently felt one pinkish nose through the bars.

"Don't touch!" said the boy hoarsely.

"Can't I just stroke it?" entreated the girl.

"Leave them alone!" was the reply.

Katya felt she ought to take offence at this but just couldn't. Through the slot of the box marked FOOTMAN peeped the head of a snake turning this way and that and then hiding.

"Ooh!" exclaimed Katya. "It's a little snake!"

"Snake yourself!" muttered the boy. And although the

term was a bit harsh, his voice seemed just a shade less angry. Apparently Katya's admiration did not wholly displease him. He even went so far as to open the box slightly and Katya was able to catch a glimpse of a tortoise. The creature poked out its snake-like head and scratched feebly with its paws against the cardboard walls, trying to get out of its cramped quarters. Its sharp little tail protruded ridiculously from underneath its armoured shell.

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl, and reaching out towards the animal she stumbled over the box and fell sprawling all over it.

The boy seized Katya by the arm, dragged her away from the box, and shouted: "Where do you think you are going? Can't you find anything better to do? Go back to where you came from!"

But by this time Katya was quite unable to go away. There was definitely something else in the croquet-box, something frightening! She fastened her eyes on the box which had a kind of sliding drawer. It was impossible to discern anything through the very tiny slit (which had probably been cut to let the air in).

It would be quite crazy to ask the boy anything now. For one thing he wouldn't answer. And anyway she felt a bit hurt. She just couldn't bear to be shouted at. She put on her most thoughtful expression, took a step backward, then said, as though to herself but just loud enough for the boy to hear: "He thinks people will believe him. H'm! As if people can't see that he's just trying to put on airs. But he really hasn't got anything very terrifying at all in all those boxes."

She tried very hard to think of something insulting to upset the boy. But he simply gave a contemptuous grunt and shrugged his shoulders.

"Aha!" thought Katya, "it's beginning to work!"

She took a deep breath and began again in her nastiest tone: "Fancy! To think that I was startled! Wants us to think he's got a shark in there or something ... or a tiger ... or ... a crocodile ..."

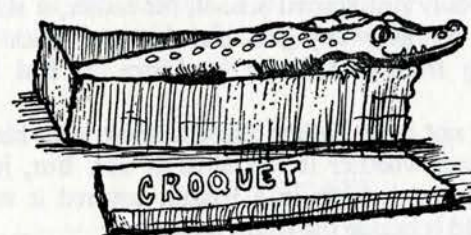
"Crocodile," repeated the lad gloomily.

Katya laughed with all the scorn she could muster.

"Crocodile," said the lad once again.

"It's really disgusting the fibs he tells!" said Katya with some heat.

"Fibs? Just have a look for yourself!" exclaimed the boy, drawing back the lid of the box. Inside lay a live crocodile.



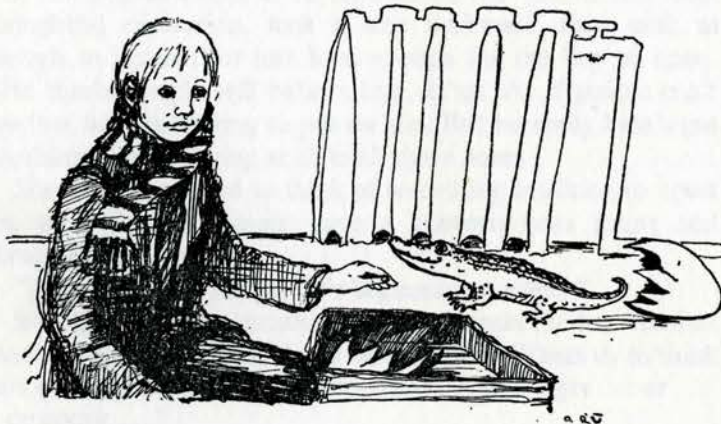


CHAPTER TWO

ABOUT five years before the time this story begins, when Mitya had only just started school, his father, a ship's captain who went on long voyages, had brought back a strange-looking egg from somewhere in Africa. It had looked like porcelain.

Nobody, not even Father himself, knew what kind of egg it was, nor even whether it was alive or not. But, just in case, they had stored it away in a basket, covered it with cotton-wool and laid it beside the warm radiator.

It lay there for a very long while. Annushka, his old nannie, had not once been able to screw up enough courage to throw it out. Then, one day, Mitya came in to the house and discovered an empty shell in the basket, and in the dark corner

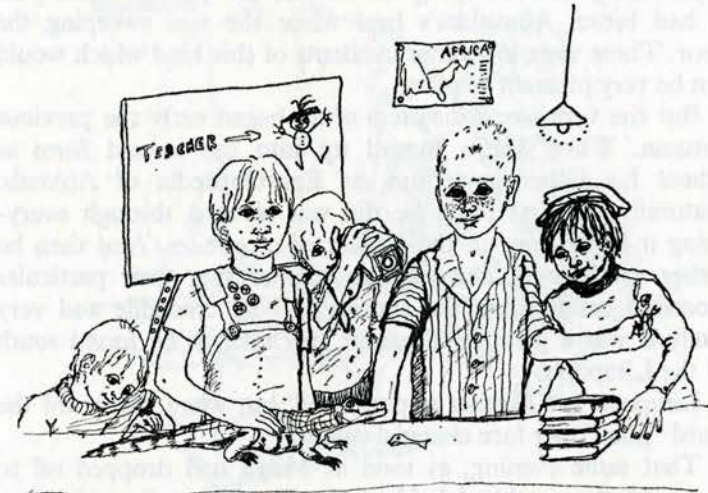


under the radiator a small odd-looking creature resembling something between a lizard and a legendary dragon. It was the baby crocodile.

Mitya soon became the best-known boy in the school. Big boys from the upper school, as well as his own classmates, would come running to have a peep at his pet crocodile.

In *Boy-Scout's Weekly* there was a special article entitled *Our Guest from Africa* and a photograph of Mitya and his crocodile. His mother kept a copy of the newspaper in her handbag and showed the article to all her friends.

One boy offered Mitya an expensive camera and the collected works of the famous Russian author Chukovsky in exchange for his crocodile. But of course Mitya turned the offer down.



Mitya's mother was particularly taken with the animal because it provoked such amazement in everybody. As she showed it to her friends she would say: "Why not let the creature live? It's nice having one's own amphibian in the house."

The only person who didn't like the thing was Annushka. She was more afraid of it than of a mouse and said it was like some unclean spirit. And when Mitya asked her what an unclean spirit actually looked like she replied: "Why, just like this nasty thing here."

Gradually they all got used to it and inquisitive visitors stopped coming in to see it. It lived in the house like any other domestic animal, crawled about wherever it pleased and swam — first in the washtub, and later in the bath.

But as the crocodile grew larger and larger Mother liked it less and less. Things became more and more unpleasant for Mitya. For some reason or other he was held to blame when the crocodile nibbled away half of Mother's nylon stocking and when the young woman who came to read the electric meter almost had an attack of hysterics when a monster about a yard long came creeping out of the dark passage. Last year it had bitten Annushka's heel while she was sweeping the floor. There were lots more incidents of this kind which would not be very pleasant to relate.

But the very worst disasters of all began early the previous autumn. When Mitya moved up into the second form at school his father gave him an Encyclopaedia of Animals. Naturally the first thing he did was to read through everything it had to say on the subject of crocodiles. And then he rather rashly went and told his mother that their particular crocodile belonged to the species of Nile crocodile and very likely it was a giant Madagascar specimen to be found south of the Limpopo.

Limpopo left Mother unperturbed, but when she heard the word "giant" her face changed colour.

That same evening, as soon as Mitya had dropped off to sleep, Mother grabbed hold of the Encyclopaedia and began to read the article on TESTACEOUS LIZARDS. And she straightaway came to the very thing she had been afraid of:

"... Not infrequently people in flat-bottomed boats have been seized by crocodiles ..."

"Just as I thought," muttered Mother and went on: "... they devour people quietly in the evening or at night and

for this purpose they drag them away to a secluded spot on the river bank ..."

"How perfectly frightful!" said Mother. "To think one could fall asleep peacefully in one's bed and wake up cornered like that in some isolated spot."

When she came to the bit about the Nile crocodile and discovered that "certain specimens are to be found which attain a length of some ten yards," she closed the book with a bang. She had had quite enough.



That very night she got hold of a tape-measure and nervously measured the length of the room. Even when she went out into the passage and squeezed up against the opposite wall, she still couldn't measure more than about six and three-quarter yards.

"So that means," she thought grimly, "it will end up by crashing through the wall and pushing its tail into someone else's flat! We've been feeding a monster right here in our own home!"

All that night she didn't sleep a wink and first thing next morning she demanded that the crocodile should be cleared out of the house.

And although Mitya, Encyclopaedia in hand, pointed out that the learned writer himself considered the figure of ten yards to be somewhat exaggerated, Mother insisted that if it were not true the Encyclopaedia would never have allowed it to be put in.

Even when Mitya read aloud to her that crocodiles attain such dimensions only when they reach the age of a hundred, Mother declared that this was a pre-Revolution edition and that the Encyclopaedia was now out of date.

From then on Mother would regularly creep up to the crocodile and measure it with a tape-measure. This went on until once it nearly bit her finger. So then she took to guessing its length by looking at it. But this made matters worse because it turned out that the crocodile seemed to have put on another half-yard every time she did this.

When spring came, things took a turn for the worse. At the end of term they began to do some repairs to the school buildings and the Pet's Corner in Mitya's classroom had to be moved somewhere or other for the summer. The animals had to be distributed among various children and Mitya took home two rabbits, a tortoise and a starling which could say "Hullo" and "Quick March".

Because of the crocodile, however, the atmosphere at home was very strained and the animals were received without enthusiasm.

Annushka soon reckoned the talking starling among the "unclean spirits", while Mother declared that she was not some kind of wild animal and nobody was going to compel *her* to live in a menagerie.

She grabbed her hat and handbag and set off to visit the headmaster. But Mitya just managed to stop her and achieved

some sort of truce — but only under very stiff terms. He gave his word of honour that in the autumn he would surrender the crocodile to the school together with the other animals. That was the first thing. Secondly, he had to guarantee that the crocodile would not damage or spoil any single thing in the house. In return for this Mother agreed to put up with the animals until August 31st.

But that very morning (when our story begins) this is what took place.



Mother, Annushka and Mitya were drinking tea. Annushka had taken the milk-jug and was pouring milk into her cup. Suddenly the cup started edging sideways and the stream of milk began pouring on to the table cloth.

"What's going on here?" asked Annushka, threateningly, glaring at Mitya. At the same time the sugar-basin and the pot of jam also began to edge sideways at an ever-increasing speed. Annushka was just about able to seize a couple of knives and a paper napkin. The cloth sidled away as though it were alive. With a loud clatter, dishes, cutlery and everything else on the table went showering on to the floor.

Mother grabbed the creeping end of the cloth and pulled it towards her. The tea poured from the overturned cups and jam oozed all over the place. Mother kept tugging. Above the table appeared the jaws of the crocodile clinging to the cloth. Mitya grabbed hold of the crocodile and finally managed to pull it away — with a large portion of cloth in its mouth.

"It's a madhouse!" shrieked Mother.

"Get it out!" roared Annushka violently.

"Hullo!" chirped the starling merrily from its cage.

This inoffensive little word was the last straw. Her patience at an end Mother said in a voice of steel: "Out with the lot of 'em! Get your whole menagerie out of here!"

"How do you mean, my whole menagerie?" asked Mitya indignantly. "The rabbits have got nothing to do with this. Nor the tortoise. They've done no harm!"

Annushka suddenly let forth a loud wail and dragged out from under the table Mother's patent leather shoe practically bitten in two.

"Out with the lot!" repeated Mother firmly. "Either they go or I go."



CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Katya heard this sad tale, she began to feel very sorry—sorry for Mitya, sorry for the homeless animals, even sorry for the crocodile; after all, he couldn't help being a crocodile and not a kitten.

"What will you do now?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Mitya. "I'm trying to think."

Katya stood up and clasped her hands together.

"I know what!" she said. "Give them to me. They'll be all right. Honestly they will. I'll look after them and see to their needs."

She paused and waited for him to reply, her eyes glued to his face. For quite a long while Mitya said not a word. Then he asked: "What about your parents?"

"Oh, they're fine. And besides they aren't at home," Katya answered happily.

"Are there any small girls around the house?" asked Mitya suspiciously.

"What small girls?"

"You know the sort. The ones that slobber over you. Well . . . ?"

Katya was scared. But she plucked up courage and said truthfully: "Yes, there are. There's my little sister Milka. But she's at nursery school till half past five. And I won't let her hurt them. I promise I won't."

Mitya was once again lost in thought. Katya looked at him expectantly. He pondered for a very long time, so long, in fact, that Katya was already beginning to give up hope. Finally he said:

"Well, it's like this. I can't let you have them for the whole of the summer, of course. I daren't. They're school property. You understand, don't you? You see, you don't go to our school. You're a sort of outsider."

Katya sighed.

"But until tonight," continued Mitya, "while I make a short trip to one of my friends out in the country, I might be able to let you have them."

Katya fairly beamed.

"Now look," said the boy sternly. "You've got to remember you are taking official property into your care."

"I shall remember," promised Katya, clasping her hands tightly together.

"And you know how closely you have to guard them?"

"H'm . . . yes?"

"You have to guard them with your life."

"Right," said Katya. "I shall guard this state property with my life."

"You must make an inventory of the animals and give me a receipt," warned the boy.

Katya agreed to all this.

Mitya took the box containing the crocodile and the hutch with the two rabbits. Katya carried her ball in one hand, the starling in its cage in the other, and under her arm the box with the tortoise.

They didn't have far to go—just along a couple of streets. Katya soon began to run into various friends and acquaintances and they all wanted to come and have a peep. She had to keep her lips firmly pressed together to prevent them opening into a broad grin.

When they got to the courtyard of Katya's flat, a little girl came running up to them.

"I say, Katya, come and play ball," she called out. "Bags, I have first go!" Katya made no reply and the girl walked alongside trying hard to get a peep into the cages. Further on she caught sight of Olga, Milka's friend.

"Olga!" she called, "you are not to touch these animals or interfere with them in any way. They are school property."

The little girl opened her mouth wide ready to reply but they passed her by and she was left gaping outside.

Mitya and Katya went up to the third floor and there on one of the doors hung a small card with the words: J. P. PASTUSHKOV.

"Well here we are," said Katya, and brought out a key which she carried on a string tied round her waist.

But all of a sudden Mitya had an attack of nerves.

"Are you quite certain there's no one at home?"

"Positive," the girl reassured him. "Mother's out shopping. Granny's at the market and Father's at a rehearsal. And of course Milka's at the nursery school."

She opened the door. And the very first thing they heard were the tender strains of a violin.

Mitya looked at Katya with an expression of the utmost severity.

"I don't know why Dad's at home," she muttered glumly. "They've probably cancelled his rehearsal or something."

Mitya grunted distrustfully and they both tiptoed down the passage. From a cupboard in the wall Grandmother's white cat stared at them with gleaming eyes. Then they went into Katya's room. Toy bricks lay scattered about on the floor and against the wall ticked an old pendulum-clock with a cat's face above the dial, the eyes moving non-stop from side to side. Under the clock stood a child's bed and in it a five-year-old girl was sleeping peacefully.

Katya, horrified, gazed at the sleeping Milka and Mitya looked bitterly at Katya. It was all perfectly clear: the girl had deceived him, lured him by a ruse into her house in order to gain possession of the animals.

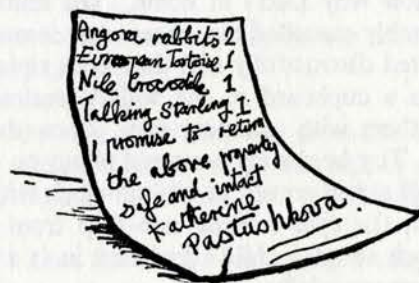
But Katya had not been deceiving him. How could she have known that Milka would be sent home that particular day because a little boy had fallen ill and all the children had been sent home as a precaution?

She placed the starling and tortoise on the floor. Clasping her hands she tried as hard as she could to prove her innocence. But Mitya was not even listening. He had made up his mind to leave without further ado. He seized the hutch, the

box and the case. But the box slipped from his hands. And when he tried to pick the tortoise up again, the crocodile-box fell with a crash. He tried balancing it on his shoulder but found he couldn't manage a cage, a hutch and a box with only two hands. Katya was sobbing quietly. Mitya looked at her, at the hutch and the cage and suddenly gave the whole thing up as hopeless.

"Make out the receipt!" he ordered.

Beaming with joy, Katya rushed to the table. She tore out a page from her arithmetic exercise-book and got her pen ready. The boy dictated and she took down his words trying hard to make as few mistakes as possible. Then she signed her name: Katya. But Mitya protested that you can't write Katya on a receipt; you've got to write Katherine because it's a document. So she signed properly and handed him the receipt. This is how it read:



"And what words can the starling say?" asked Katya.

"Oh, just one or two things," replied the boy casually as he carefully blotted the paper, folded it in four and stuffed it into his pocket. Then he handed Katya another piece of paper.

"What's this for?" she asked.

"Food for the rabbits," he replied, and mumbled to himself as he looked at the paper: "Hay... they've had that. And dandelions. Got any roots?"

"'Fraid not" said Katya rather scared.

"Then you'll have to give them oats."

"Right."

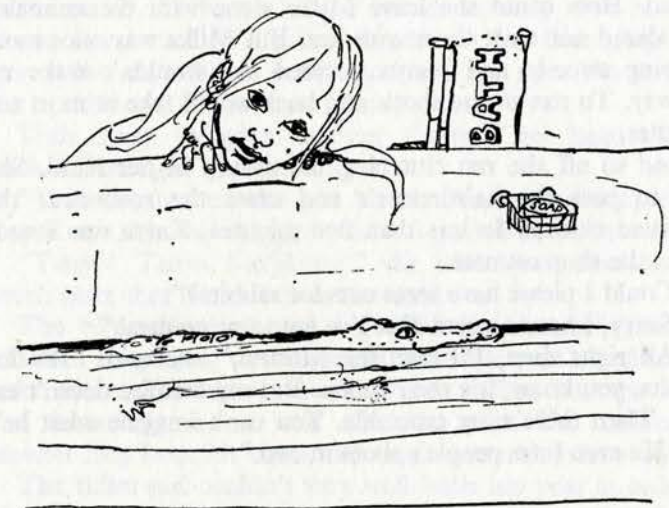
"Is there a bath here?"

"Yes."

"Put the crocodile in it."

The music coming from Father's study suddenly came to a stop. Mitya looked a bit uneasy and said: "Well, I'll be off now. But I'll be back soon. Look after them."

"Oh yes, I certainly shall," Katya reassured him. She closed the door behind him; she was alone with the animals. How the girls in her class would have gasped if they could have seen Katya with her crocodile. Especially Lilia! And Tanya! And... But there were no girls there, so Katya set about her task. She carried the box with the crocodile into the bathroom, turned on the tap and dropped the animal in. It flopped about in the water, splashing her all over. She started to laugh.



"Now then!" she said. "Don't get bored. I'll be back in a minute." Then she poured some fresh water into a basin for the starling.

"Hullo!" chirped the bird. Katya laughed joyfully. Then

she went and pulled the tortoise out of its narrow box and transferred it to the crocodile's.

"Now have a little stroll," she said to it.

Next she ran to the kitchen where she shook all the bags and jars and peeped into every sack and box. There were definitely no oats in the house. She would have to run out to the shops. But what about money? Get some from Father? From his study musical sounds could once again be heard. He was playing a piece called *The Devil's Sonata* and whenever he played that not even Grandmother dared disturb him and Milka used to be sent out for a walk.

Katya reflected for a minute. "Oh, aren't I stupid!" she said suddenly and took down from the shelf the china piggy-bank in which they were saving up for a magic lantern. She shook it over the table until there was a whole pile of coppers and silver. Just then Milka began tossing in her bed. Katya was scared. How could she leave Milka alone with the animals? She dared not trust them with her. But Milka was once more sleeping sweetly and Katya decided she wouldn't wake up anyway. To run to the shops and back would take at most ten minutes.

And so off she ran clutching the money in her hand. She had to pass the hairdresser's and cross the road near the Neptune cinema. In less than five minutes, Katya was standing at the shop counter.

"Could I please have some oats for rabbits?"

"Sorry, I have no oats. But I've got some oatmeal."

"All right then, I'll take the oatmeal," she said. "It's for rabbits, you know, it's their ration. But my tortoise doesn't eat oats. Then there's my crocodile. You can't imagine what he's like. He even bites people's shoes in two."



All the customers were staring at her, and one young lad, carrying a whole chain of ring-shaped bread-rolls slung round his shoulder and a bag of macaroni in his hand, stepped right up to her and glared at her as though she herself chewed up shoes... And when Katya went out of the shop, the boy followed close on her heels, chewing a bread-ring as he walked and not taking his eyes off her. Katya hurried as fast as she could. She ran across the road, turned the corner and went running towards the Neptune cinema. People were crowding to get in. All of a sudden she spied Tanya just walking through the cinema entrance. Tanya was her very closest friend. "Wait for me, Tanya!" she cried. "I've got something to tell you!" But Tanya had already disappeared through the doors. What now? Did this mean that Tanya was not going to know anything about Katya's animals? Tanya might not think of popping in to see her after the performance and Katya herself would certainly have no time to pay her a visit. Well, that would be a fine friendship! To have a live crocodile in your own home and not even to show the tip of its tail to your best friend!

With these thoughts buzzing through her head, Katya dashed in straight after her friend.

"Ticket," shouted the girl at the door and attempted to stop Katya, but she wriggled past and got lost in the crowd.

"Tanya! Tanya Karlikova!" she cried, but there was so much noise that her voice was drowned.

The boy with the bread-rings and the macaroni had also followed Katya into the cinema but when he was asked for his ticket he turned back without a word, walked into the street and leaned against a wall near the exit. He unthreaded another ring from his chain and began munching leisurely.

The ticket-girl couldn't very well leave her post in order to give chase to Katya. She could only crane her neck and look out for her in the foyer. Katya, however, was picking her way through the crowd craning her neck to see Tanya.

A bell rang and everybody began to surge into the cinema auditorium. It was then that Katya spied Tanya in the distance. She made a dash towards her but before she could

reach her she had disappeared into the hall and a little later she caught sight of her taking her seat in a row by the wall. Once more Katya began elbowing her way towards her.

"Tanya!" she called. "I haven't got much time. I can't keep chasing you. I've got some animals at home." And she rapidly proceeded to tell her friend the important details. Just then the lights dimmed.

"Sit down!" shushed everybody from behind and both girls sat down on one seat. Thereupon people sitting beside them started grumbling about the girls pushing and asked them to behave themselves. Tanya remained seated and Katya squatted against the wall and once more rapidly began telling her tale.

It was now the turn of the people in front to get annoyed. They couldn't hear because the girls were chattering, they said, though really there was nothing to listen to because so far only announcements of one kind or another had appeared on the screen.

Anyway, Tanya, by this time, had got the hang of the situation.

"H'm," she whispered excitedly, "a crocodile! A talking one! Let's go!"

And they began groping their way towards the exit. Now there were irate whisperings from all sides. One small girl sitting on the end seat of a row pulled one of Katya's plaits with all her might. Bending low the two girls fairly raced down the aisle. The entire audience, it appeared, were calling them angry names. But it was when they reached the doors that the real trouble started. The ticket-girl flatly refused to open the doors.

"You may leave when the *Golden Fish* is over and not a minute before." The girls were alarmed. Looking at the screen they could see that the old man was only just getting ready to cast his net into the sea for the first time. The usherette pointed to a couple of empty seats.

"Sit down there!"

Then Katya lost her temper. She didn't like being shouted

at even when it was done in a whisper. She shouted back at the usherette, also in a whisper.

"Never seen anything like it! It's only people with tickets who've got to stay till the end! I've got no ticket. You've got no right to make me sit through to the end of the *Golden Fish*! You ought to show me out! Shame on you for not doing your duty!"

"What d'you mean, you've got no ticket! Show me your ticket!" said the usherette hoarsely, now in a state of utter bewilderment.

"I haven't got one," whispered Katya with some pride and the ticket-girl, without another word, opened the doors and let them through... They slipped into the foyer and rushed to the exit.

"Ah, here comes the girl without a ticket," gloated the young woman in the box-office. "Have they kicked you out?" Katya could jolly well have given a nasty reply to that if she'd wanted to. But she was in no mood to start explaining and out they rushed into the street.

The lad with the bread-rings detached himself from his leaning-post and followed them.





CHAPTER FOUR

WHILE Katya was out buying the oats, Milka slept peacefully. The crocodile was swimming about in the bath, the starling was hopping about and chirping "Hullo" and "Quick march" to the flies around his cage and the tortoise was crawling about in the croquet-box, which, after the shoe-box, it found most roomy. The rabbits were nibbling the last few dandelions left in the hutch.

Father, as usual, had got lost at the thirty-seventh bar of *The Devil's Sonata* and was starting all over again. In short, everything was quiet and peaceful.

But just at the very moment when Katya was walking up towards the Neptune, a ray of sunshine fell on Milka's face. She waved it away in her sleep but this didn't help. She rubbed her eyes with her fists, sneezed and awoke. For a long while she lay, screwing up her eyes and stretching until she finally opened her eyes properly.

And then she saw the bird, the rabbits and the tortoise. She half closed her eyes, half opened them again. The rabbits, the bird and the tortoise remained exactly where they were before. Milka jumped out of bed and ran towards them. She was five years old and wasn't particularly puzzled about where they had come from, or why they happened to be in her room.

She was simply happy that they *were* there. She squatted down by the rabbits and poked a finger inside the hutch.

"Quick march!" chirped the starling. Milka looked at it and nodded; she had understood immediately. The little bird was playing "school". It was playing the teacher's part and was giving orders in the morning exercises.

"Jolly good!" agreed Milka. She stood at attention for the exercise and marched round the room trying to keep time to the beat of *The Devil's Sonata*, the music of which wafted in from Father's study. All entangled in her long nightie Milka kept marching on. She was waiting for teacher to give the command "Stop!" and start another exercise. But the starling wasn't even thinking about saying "Stop!" It suddenly jumped into the little basin of water, fluttering its wings and splashing water all over the place.

Milka saw what "teacher" was doing and got very angry.

"We haven't finished the march yet and you are washing already!" she cried. "You mustn't wash yet. I had better be teacher and you..."

And so that the starling should agree to let her have teacher's part, Milka was already thinking out something interesting for it to do.

"You can be on duty at the wash-basin."

"Hullo!" cried the bird.

Aha! (thought Milka), that means it's friendly and was greeting her like a little boy who had just arrived at the nursery-school.

"Good-morning, children!" said Milka very importantly, addressing herself to the rabbits and tortoise. She started to clap her hands.

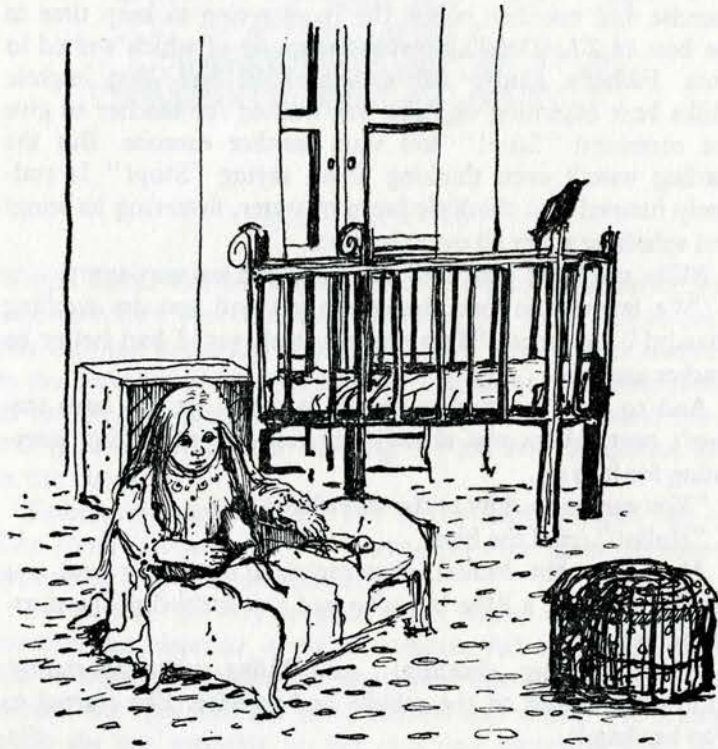
"Children, we are now going for a walk," she commanded in her best teacher's voice. She opened the hutch and helped the rabbits hop out.

They began jumping about the room. One of them hid under the bed and the other under Katya's table.

"Don't scamper about, children," cried Milka, but they paid no attention.

She then opened the door for the starling but it refused to fly out.

"Now just look how this boy is dawdling," she said indignantly. She pulled the bird out of the cage but it struggled out of her hand and flew up to the ceiling, hopping about exactly as it pleased.



Milka couldn't do the slightest thing to stop it.

The tortoise proved to be the most obedient pupil. When Milka pulled it out of its box and placed it on the floor it drew its head in under its shell and sat there very quietly.

"That's a clever girl, that's a good girl," said Milka approvingly.

Nothing came of her plan for a walk and so she decided to have a rest period. She placed the tortoise in her largest doll's bed, covered it up with a blanket and tucked it cosily in. It made no attempt to run off anywhere and Milka liked it more and more.

"You shall be my daughter," she told it. "And as for you," addressing the rabbits, "I won't play with you any more." She adjusted the blanket and tried to lay the tortoise on its side.

"Sleep, my little one, sleep," and she hummed it a little tune. And while she sang and rocked her "daughter" to sleep, first one rabbit then the other slipped through the open door into the passage. Milka didn't even notice.





CHAPTER FIVE

THE girls hurried as fast as they could; Katya had to feed the rabbits. They were quite near her house when Tanya suddenly started to run over to the other side of the street.

"Where are you off to?" asked Katya.

"That's where she lives."

"Who?"

"Lilia, of course."

"Are we really going to Lilia's?"

Tanya stopped in the middle of the road. "Well, of course, what do you think! Do you honestly think it would be very nice of us not to tell Lilia? D'you remember when the famous film star came to her sister's house, she came and fetched us right away. We can't hide the crocodile from her. It wouldn't be nice. Would it now?"

Katya felt ashamed. To tell the truth, she would have loved Lilia to see the animals. She said: "Very well, then. Only let's be as quick as we can. Because it's already time to give the rabbits their food."

For the sake of speed they decided not to go up to Lilia's flat, which was on the third floor, but just to go into the courtyard — which was a very large and noisy one. In one corner of it someone was sawing wood; in another they were shaking out a carpet and in the middle a game of volley-ball was in progress. To cap it all, radios were blaring forth from all the open windows.

The girls looked up to Lilia's window and called out in unison: "Li—lia!" But she did not appear. Again they shouted and again nothing happened. When they had collected enough breath to call again they heard a deafening roar just behind them: LI—LIA!

It was the boy with the macaroni yelling at the top of his voice. He was standing just a little way away. Immediately Lilia's head poked out from behind a pot of flowers.

"Lilia, quick! Come and see what I've got," cried Katya.

"What is it?" queried Lilia from above.

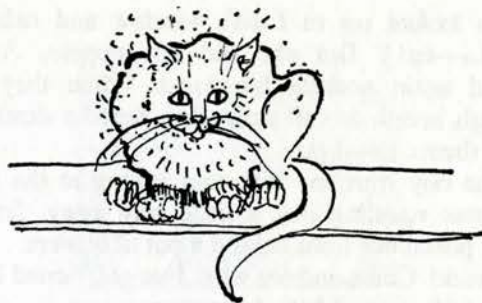
"Come quickly! I've got some animals!"

"Can't hear you. Shall I come down and let you in?"

Katya and Tanya looked at each other in despair and then at the boy with the macaroni. He immediately grasped the situation and understood what was required of him. Transferring his bag of macaroni to his other hand, he swelled out his chest, put his hand to his mouth and yelled: "Come down right away. Come and see my crocodile."

"I'll be right down," answered Lilia and her head disappeared.





CHAPTER SIX

FATHER was standing in front of a one-legged music-stand on which lay a sheet of music. He was playing his violin. The fingers of his left hand flew along the strings and the bow moved with such speed you could hardly see it. *The Devil's Sonata* is an extremely difficult piece. And just now Father was coming to the trickiest passage. As usual, at this point, his spectacles began to slide down his nose (they hung on very precariously by one side-piece). Spectacles and eternally creaking doors were two things that irritated Father immensely and prevented him from enjoying life. Every morning regularly, when he left home to go to rehearsals, Father would definitely decide to take his spectacles to be repaired and to buy some machine-oil for the door-hinges. And every evening when he got home he would remember that he had forgotten to do both these things.

Having adjusted his spectacles, Father passed on to the tricky "fifths" section. This was the tenderest section of the piece, played on the highest part of the strings. To achieve this Father would stretch his fingers right up to the bridge and play ever such gentle sounds a bit like the peep of a bird.

Grandmother's white cat, dozing in the cupboard in the passage, would prick up his ears whenever he heard this fifth section and would get terribly excited because he would imagine it to be the squeak of a mouse. He was a very respectable cat. Although there were no mice in the house and he had never seen one in his life, he had always dreamed of catching

one. And so every time Grandmother grated the horseradish or Katya rubbed out a mistake in her exercise book with her indiarubber, or when Father got to the fifths, the cat would tear off at full speed in pursuit of the mouse.

And on this occasion, hearing the squeak, he leaped from the cupboard and began slinking stealthily towards Father's door, twitching his tail excitedly.

Father heard the wretched door squeak. He winced. Puss, whiskers all atremble like a beast of prey on the prowl, thrust into the room.

"Shoo!" shouted Father brandishing his bow. Puss unhurriedly went out.

Father resumed his playing.

Hearing the squeak again, puss turned back. Once more the door squeaked. Father turned round furiously. His spectacles



jumped from his nose and fell to the ground. His eyes fell, not upon a cat but on a blurred white patch.

"Ah, so there you are!" said Father, seizing the cat by the scruff of the neck and flinging it into the passage. Then he closed the door (which immediately opened, of course) and stamped his feet with rage. The offended cat hissed something or other and crawled under the cupboard to keep company with a headless doll and a couple of building bricks. And there he remained waving his tail with indignation. Father looked for his spectacles, cursing his confounded house full of insolent cats and creaking doors where a man couldn't have a moment's peace. Meanwhile he accidentally kicked his spectacles which flew into a corner and thereby ruined his chances of recovering them.

In a great fury Father finally gave it up as a bad job and began to play without spectacles, bringing his nose right up against the page of music.

In the passage a white rabbit scuttled rapidly past the cat. At the sight of it, puss began to spit, but to be on the safe side he buried himself a little deeper inside the cupboard. The rabbit pricked up its ears, pursed its lips, then unhurriedly hopped into Father's study.

For over five minutes now Father had been left undisturbed and he was beginning to feel a little calmer when suddenly there was that intolerable squeak again. Beside himself with rage he spun round and, of course, once more he saw the familiar blurred white patch.

"Get out!" he roared fiercely, making a grab to catch the thing. The rabbit hopped under the divan.



CHAPTER SEVEN

KATYA'S grandmother had finished all her shopping and was coming back from the market. Climbing up to her flat on the third floor she heard their door opening — the one facing the landing. She quickened her step and shouted from below: "Wait a moment, don't close the door."

It so happened that her neighbour was just coming out of her flat and she was carrying a bowl full of wet washing.

"Good morning, Nadezhda Petrovna!" said Grandmother warmly. "I thought it was our door..."

"Your cat has been sniffing at my milk," said Nadezhda Petrovna, pursing her lips. "How many times have I asked you not to let it run along the ledge outside the balcony."

"I'm terribly sorry!"

"It's interesting how all the cats in the yard come creeping up to my window," went on Miss Petrovna, continuing her climb to the attic. "Anybody that can't look after a cat shouldn't keep one."

"Well all right, just as you say," muttered Grandmother.

The door of her neighbour's flat remained slightly ajar.

Grandmother put down her heavy basket and started to look for her key. Suddenly she gave the basket an accidental push and knocked it over sideways.

The onions bobbed out and went capering down the steps.

"Silly billy that I am," said Grandmother and went back down to gather them up. Then the door of the Patushkovas' flat burst open and through it flew a white rabbit which described an arc and flopped straight into Grandmother's



basket. Then the door slammed to and there was a clatter of keys, bolts and chains. You could hear Father's footsteps withdrawing — and then everything was quiet. The rabbit didn't seem to be distressed by its change of fortune. Burrowing in the basket it picked out a nice carrot and began to nibble. And Grandmother, having collected her onions, climbed back up the stairs and suddenly spied the animal in her basket. "Oh, hello there!" she said, wondering where on earth it could have come from. Not being able to solve that particular problem, Grandmother squatted down by the basket, watched the rabbit munch the carrot with great gusto, and was touched. "My little pet, my little beauty," she cooed. Then she caught sight of Nadezhda Petrovna's open door and everything became clear.

"Well she's a fine one," she said, shaking her head. "Telling others what to do!" Then addressing the rabbit she said: "Well you've had your meal and you've had your little stroll. Come along home, my dear, or you'll get lost." She ever so gently pushed the rabbit into her neighbour's flat and threw in after it a cabbage and a turnip. Then she carefully closed the door so that it would not run back out again. And now Grandmother had nothing left to cook her soup with, but she was not in the least bit upset.

"Never mind. I'll go and do some more shopping," she decided, and taking her basket she went downstairs.

And that was how one Angora rabbit disappeared.



CHAPTER EIGHT

KATYA made great haste to get back home. She had to feed the rabbits. But Lilia declared she would not go a single step farther without Shura. The rabbits wouldn't die (she said) and Shura might be mortally offended... Friends didn't behave like that, she said. "And may I perish on this very spot," she affirmed, "if Shura is not this very moment sitting somewhere on a bench in the avenue reading *The Headless Rider*."

The girls tore along the avenue, the boy with the macaroni silently following behind munching yet another bread-ring as he went.

Shura was, in fact, sitting on a park-bench between a very young nursemaid and a little old man who was fast asleep. She was reading *The Headless Rider* by Maine-Reade.

"'May the devil take you!' exclaimed the hunter. 'Another six seconds and I shoot you dead. If you are simply a stuffed animal I shall not harm you. And if you are the devil you will also come to no harm. But if you are a man playing the role of a corpse, then you deserve these bullets. You refuse? Very well! I shall fire. One, two, three, four, five, six! Following these words a shot rang out...'"

And at that point in Shura's reading, Katya, Lilia and Tanya came running up.

"What did I tell you?" said Lilia triumphantly.

"Listen, Shura. You'll die when you've heard what I've got to tell you!"

But Shura did not die. Her neighbour, however, the nursemaid carrying an infant-in-arms, very nearly did. While the girls vied with one another to tell Shura about the crocodile and the starling, she kept gasping with excitement and in her agitation she kept bouncing her baby higher and higher, so that if the story had gone on a little longer the poor creature would have found itself up in a tree.

"Are you certain it's not all a pack of lies?" she asked. "Come on then, let's go." And picking up the baby, she leaped up from the bench. And off they all ran. It was indeed high time the rabbits were fed.





CHAPTER NINE

AFTER throwing the rabbit out of his flat (thinking of course it was the cat), Father went back to his room rubbing his hands with satisfaction. At last he was rid of that disgusting cat. Nobody else would now disturb him while he practised his *Devil's Sonata*.

"Let's see how you'll get in now," he gloated as he placed his violin to his chin. Half-closing his eyes he played the first note. He didn't get to the second. The door gave a horrible squeak. Father went cold. Once again the white cat was in the room.

"Not possible," he muttered in gloomy incredulity, his bow falling from his hands. The cat moved insolently across the room in funny little hops. Father was convinced that it was doing this on purpose. It wants to show that it doesn't care two hoots about its master or his locks and bolts, he thought. The "cat" went and hid under the divan.

"That animal will drive me out of my mind, you'll see!" said Father gloomily and went out to look for a mop.

But the second rabbit (for this was indeed it), sat peacefully under the divan and nibbled at some sea-grass which had fallen out of the mattress. But he didn't have time for much; in came Father armed with a mop.

"I'll get rid of that cat yet!" he said, poking the mop under the divan. The rabbit jumped out and perched itself under the cupboard. "I'll get that cat yet," Father kept mumbling, rummaging under the cupboard. "I'll show that accursed cat!" he went on, driving it from under the cupboard. It kept trying

to find refuge behind the chest but Father managed to overtake it.

"We'll see if there'll be any more squeaking, you dirty little cat," said Father in triumph. He seized the animal, thrust it into the cupboard, quickly closed both doors and locked them.

"Now you can miaow as much as you like," he said cheerfully, and bent his ear close to listen.

There wasn't the merest miaow.

By this time Father's nerves were at breaking point. He wasn't playing *The Devil's Sonata* half as well as he might be. He had better take some valerian to calm himself down. He made his way to the medicine chest and began fumbling among all the little phials and putting them to his nose. He kept picking up the wrong one—castor oil, cod liver oil, surgical spirit . . .

While he was looking for his soothing drops he became more and more edgy. Finally he did come across the correct phial; it was hidden away behind innumerable other bottles. He reached down a glass, sat himself down in an armchair and carefully began to pour out the drops, counting them in a whisper — "one, two, three . . ."

Now the *real* cat was sleeping in a cupboard in the passage.



Now and again, in its sleep, it would give a sudden start and show its claws. It was probably dreaming that, at long last, it had finally caught a mouse . . .

Suddenly it opened one eye and dilated its nostrils. It could scent a fascinating and irresistible odour. It was the valerian. And, as even Tom Sawyer knew, to a cat there is nothing more delicious than valerian. Any cat is ready to run to the ends of the earth for it.

Puss licked his lips, leaped from the cupboard and darted towards Father's room like a mad bull.

Father was sitting in his armchair counting:

"... ten ... eleven ... twelve ..."

And at the very second that Father was saying "thirteen", puss bounded into the room with its ghastly miaow.

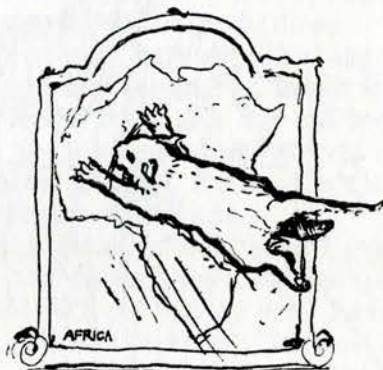
Glass and phial fell from Father's hands.

With a low rumbling purr the cat threw itself upon the drops of spilt valerian.

"It's here again . . ." muttered Father faintly . . .

He glanced at the cat and then cast his eyes towards the cupboard. *The key was still in the lock!*

He got up and tugged at the cupboard doors. They were both locked. He looked back at the cat once again and began to feel queer. He simply failed to understand how one and the same cat could at one and the same time be both on the landing in the locked cupboard *and* in his room. Puss had by now



licked the floor clean and was mewing plaintively but there was no more valerian. It started to pace the room in a kind of drunken daze, and suddenly caught sight of itself in a large mirror. With a great hiss it rushed at its adversary, leaping up more than a yard into the air. Banging its head against the glass, it fell back to the floor, then scornfully turning its back on the mirror made for the opposite corner. On the way, for some reason or other, it jumped up on to the piano and from this height it observed on the wall a picture representing the continent of Africa. Puss decided to invade Africa. It sprang up and remained poised, clinging with one paw to a camel and with the other to a cloud. And all this — cat, picture, nail and string — fell to the ground with a crash.

Father sat in his armchair and gazed speechless at the cat. The cat, having done with Africa, emitted a savage war-cry and began to celebrate its victory. It found a ball and skidded along upon it, sped from cupboard to window, from window to stove and, in the course of all this, knocked over everything it was possible to knock over.

"Never seen anything like it," said Father. "I *know* that things like this do not happen."

At that very second the starling flew into the room — the one Milka had let loose from its cage. Seeing the cat it immediately flew to the ceiling. But Father could only stare at the cat; he hadn't noticed the bird. Puss, having overturned one last flower-pot, scraped away the dust with its paws and gazed intently at Father. At this point he distinctly heard someone say "Hullo". He pressed his fingers to his temples.

"In the first place," he said, "I don't believe in fairy-tales. Secondly, there are no such things as miracles. There is a strictly scientific explanation for everything."

Puss sprang up on to the music-stand and came toppling down with the music.

"It's all perfectly simple," said Father. "What is happening here is something very ordinary indeed . . ."

"Hullo!" called the starling from its ledge.

"A talking cat, that's what it is. A common hallucination. Or a mirage. But then *they* are supposed to take place in

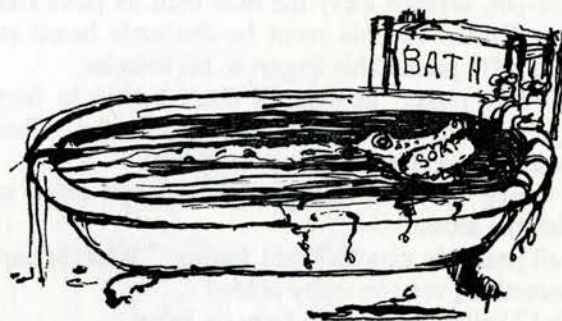
deserts. In normal cases, a cold compress should be applied to the head and the attack passes off." He walked slowly to the door.

"Quick march!" cried the starling.

"No hooliganism, please!" said Father sharply. In the bathroom Father took a turkish towel from its hook, turned on the tap and bent over. From the water, a crocodile gazed straight into his eyes.

"Ah, what have we here," said Father weakly and collapsed on to a stool. He sat for a while with eyes closed. Then he got up and tiptoed out of the room. He walked up and down the passage then stood for a while outside the bathroom. Then he opened the door with a jerk and peeped inside. The crocodile had not disappeared. It was wagging its tail and its toothy jaws were wide open. Father flung his towel over his shoulder and slowly returned to his room. He had decided that perhaps it would be best if he left the flat and got some fresh air. The first thing that met his eye was a white rabbit snugly asleep in his felt hat. But nothing really surprised him now. Giving up the whole thing as utterly hopeless, he turned his back on it and left the house, the towel still over his shoulder.

And the starling, whirling round the room, flew out through a small skylight.



CHAPTER TEN

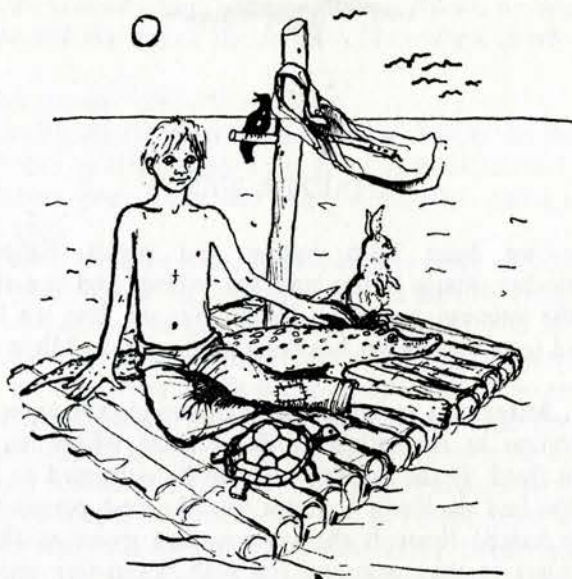
So far we have been telling you about Katya and Grandmother, about Milka and the rabbits and the starling, about the valerian and *The Devil's Sonata*. But we haven't managed to tell you what has been happening to Mitya all this time.

Well, Mitya was speeding along in the electric train to the small station in the village of Martushkin where his friend Volodya lived. If the animals were to be entrusted to anyone (so Mitya had decided), Volodya was the best person for the job. He looked through the window and gazed at the telegraph wires as they rose and fell with fascinating regularity. He took the receipt out of his pocket and read it through once more. Everything was in order. He settled back comfortably and once again looked through the window, following those beguiling telegraph wires on their up and down journey. And very soon he too had the feeling of moving up and down with them. Very soon he was beginning to nod and not long afterwards was sound asleep.

He had a dream. He is on a raft with all his animals, floating on the ocean. They are seated in a circle around him. Through a telescope Mitya surveys the boundless ocean, and feels the raft tossing up and down, up and down on the waves...

Then he sights land... Volodya's mother and Volodya's aunt are awaiting him on the shore with outstretched hands. Mitya casts anchor. Volodya's mother, smiling tenderly, looks at the crocodile and tickles its neck. Volodya's aunt tries to tie a bow round the rabbit's neck...

He smiles in his sleep. At that moment an oncoming train tears past them... Strips of light and shade fall across



Mitya's sleeping face . . . The smile departs from his lips . . . He passes to an entirely different dream. The cat has leaped on the starling and swallowed it up. Then the crocodile pounces on the cat and swallows *it* up. Thereupon Volodya's aunt darts out of her cottage armed with a gun and fires at the crocodile. The crocodile flies up to the sky where it is no longer a crocodile but a gryphon from his Encyclopaedia. In its claws it clutches a European tortoise. Below it swirl dark, menacing clouds. Laughing hoarsely the gryphon unclenches its claws . . . the tortoise swoops down from a terrific height, strikes a rock and splits up into a thousand fragments . . . Each fragment changes into a huge fly-agaric. The rabbits hurl themselves at them, devour them and drop down dead . . .

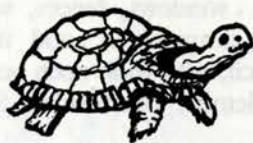
"Either they go or I go . . . and that's final!" squeals Volodya's mother, and from the cottage door come flying a variety of creatures—cats, tortoises, rabbits, crocodiles . . .

The door slams . . . windows, fences, washing on the line, house . . . everything disappears . . . and in the empty space sits a black raven which, with wide-open beak, croaks:

"Ladies and gentlemen, Martushkin Station, Martushkin Station!"

Mitya gave a start and woke up. The train was standing in the station. He jumped quickly out and ran to the exit, muttering darkly: "So that's what's going to happen . . . or maybe even worse . . ."





CHAPTER ELEVEN

At the very moment when Mitya was dreaming of the tortoise in the gryphon's claws, Milka was wheeling her doll's pram about in the courtyard. Inside lay the tortoise wrapped in a blanket. "Don't sit up or you'll catch cold," said Milka, sternly giving the pram a little shake. Suddenly the tortoise began to move over and spread itself over the pillow.

"Now don't be naughty," she said and tried to push it back. But she very rapidly withdrew her hand.

"Ouch!" The tortoise had bitten her finger. The little girl was most annoyed.

"Oh you . . . !" she cried angrily.

Lev, a little boy from the next street came running up. "Say!" he exclaimed, looking at the animal. "Now that's really something!"

"It's nasty," said Milka through her tears.

"Where did you get it?" asked the boy.

"Nowhere — it just came . . . Now you are not going to be my daughter any more, not if you behave like that!"

"I'll swap you my magnet for it," offered Lev.

"No!"

"How about this half of a pair of scissors? It can still cut."

"No!" said Milka again.

"Well, what else do you want?"

He proceeded to turn out his pockets and emptied all his treasures straight on to the ground. Both children squatted down and began to rummage among them. The boy picked out each one separately and praised it shamelessly and dishonestly.

"Terrific lens, this. It's a magnifying glass. You can set fire

to anything you like with it. Shall I burn a hole in your dress?"

"No!" Milka shook her head vigorously.

"Well how about this hook? Do you know what it's for? It's for hanging a camera on."

"No!"

Lev did not lose heart.

"Well, take this balance-wheel from a clock, just look. It's all gold. D'you see it shining?"

"No."

"It's jolly good, though, isn't it?"

"Jolly good," agreed Milka.

"Look, if you want it to, it can stand up and if you want to, it can lie down. That's something like! Really good!"

"No, it's no good," said Milka. "What else have you got there, in that little box? Anything I'd like?"

Lev shrugged his shoulders: "No, nothing much. Just some ribbons and things. Nothing else."

"I'll have the ribbons!" declared Milka firmly, and seized the little box.

Lev was amazed to get the tortoise so cheaply. Not only did he give her the ribbons, but generously added a piece of sealing-wax and a screw.

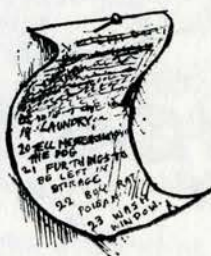
And Milka began to lay out her coloured ribbons triumphantly on the bench.

And that was how the tortoise vanished.



CHAPTER TWELVE

WHEN Nadezhda Petrovna had hung out her washing on the line in the attic, she came back to her flat with her empty wash tub. She slammed the door behind her, stumbled over something round and hard, and fell with a crash to the floor. The tub flew from her hand and went rolling down the passage. She got up, switched on the light and saw a turnip and a cabbage head on the floor. She simply couldn't understand where these vegetables had come from because that day the only things she had prepared were jellied fish dishes. But she had no time to think about things like that now. "Hooligans!" she said angrily, and went into her room. She was getting ready to go on her holidays and was seeing to the last few things before her departure. An old tablecloth lay spread out in the centre of the room on the floor and on it lay two fur coats, a red fox fur, a white muff and a deerskin cap. A list headed THINGS TO BE SEEN TO was pinned up on the wall. The first eighteen items had already been crossed off but there were still a few left:



She crossed off number nineteen and went to the phone to ring up Medvedkina who lived on the first floor. She warned her that if ever again she allowed her dog to walk under her windows she would pour boiling water over it and report the matter to the appropriate authority. Then she replaced the receiver and carefully crossed off number twenty. Then she put on her hat, tied up her things in a bundle and set off to the storage depot to deposit her things for safekeeping while on holiday.

Nadezhda Petrovna walked along the avenue firmly clasping her precious bundle of furs. All around children were playing and girls selling ice-cream and flowers were offering their wares in clear, ringing voices. A strongish wind stirred the leaves on the pavement and sent rocketing upwards bundles of balloons on sale in the street.

But Nadezhda Petrovna neither saw nor heard anything of all this. She was in a bad temper. In front of her, blocking her path, was a big fat man with three enormous boxes on his head. He was carefully avoiding the passing children so as not to brush against them and was very much in Miss Petrovna's way. In the opposite direction, clearing a path through the passers-by, came Katya with her little bag of oatmeal, followed by Tanya, Lilia, Shura, the nursemaid and baby, two other girls and the boy with the macaroni, now on his seventh bread-ring. Katya was in a tremendous hurry. It was now high time to feed the rabbits.

Then all of a sudden . . . Katya bumped right into the fat man with the boxes.

"Ow!" roared the fat man. He toppled over and sat down on the pavement. The boxes capsized into the middle of Katya's group. The girls screamed and waved their arms. The boxes scattered all over the place and multicoloured balls burst out of them and went bouncing about — balls of all sizes.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry!" said Katya fearfully, looking at the balls as they went rolling all over the avenue. The very biggest one bounded up and struck Nadezhda Petrovna.

"Hooligans!" she shrieked. "Rascals! The lot of you!" The fat man roared: "Well what do you think of that! You walk



along minding your own business and they come charging into you!" The balls continued to roll in all directions while the girls helped the man to his feet and dusted him. But he pushed them aside and went on shouting: "One hundred and twenty-five! That's what's on the invoice! And now look what's happened!"

He gazed down the avenue. All over the place they were. Children were picking them up, starting a game, throwing them to one another. Some started football practice. School teams bobbed up from all corners. Children from a nursery-school, quietly walking along in pairs, suddenly scampered off with bird-like shrieks and began to chase the balls. Grown-ups, too, and even old folk, smiled and began to pick them up from the pavement.

Alone among all these Nadezhda Petrovna kept shouting darkly and angrily: "Hooligans! Louts! To the police-station the lot of you!"

The fat man suddenly stopped shouting and leaning his head to one side took a long look at the jolly scene.

"Come on, kids!" he roared, beginning to enjoy it all and

brushing aside Nadezhda Petrovna who was pushing hard at him, made a dash to collect the balls. Katya and, of course, all her companions, rushed to help him.

"How many did you have?" asked Katya.

"A hundred and twenty-five. That's what's on the invoice," shouted the fat man.

Nadezhda Petrovna would not, in the ordinary way, have left the matter at that. They had struck her with their balls had they not? But just at that moment she caught sight of a girl carrying something wrapped up in a sheet and this made her think there must be a long queue at the storage-depot. So on she dashed trying hard to overtake the girl.

But she found, in actual fact, that there was no queue there at all. She walked straight up to the man in charge. And while he was inspecting her things on the counter she took out her list from her handbag and crossed off number twenty-one (the one about the furs). Then the man said:

"One male polecat fur coat," and noted it down on a receipt-slip. Then he drew out the second fur coat. Something dropped out of it.

"We don't accept rabbits, madam," he said suddenly.

"What do you mean, rabbit?" said Miss Petrovna indignantly. "That's Australian kangaroo."

"Do you call this a kangaroo?" asked the man, lifting up a white rabbit by its ears.

For a moment Nadezhda Petrovna was speechless and looked blankly at it.

"Look here," she said finally, "whose leg are you pulling?"

"Madam," said the man sternly, tapping his pencil on the counter, "I am not going to argue. Please take your animal away."

Miss Petrovna flared up: "I have quite enough to put up with from cats at home without having hares thrust at me here!" she cried. "Yours is the only depot where I've been offered a hare. Goodness knows why!"

"Madam," said the man. "In the first place, it is not a hare. It's a rabbit. In the second place, in so far as it fell out of

your coat, it is *your* rabbit. Had it fallen from mine," he added gently, as he looked at it, "it would have been mine."

But Miss Petrovna would have none of this: "I could understand if it were moth. But rabbits in a fur coat!" Then she sort of choked and flushed up in red spots. She suddenly recalled that her door had been left open for a few moments while she had been up in the attic.

"It would seem," she said rather faintly, "that my neighbours are capable of anything. I even know which one of them has done it. It's Medvedkina!"

She grabbed the rabbit and wrapped it up in a cloth. And leaving the storage-depot, she darted straight off home without calling in for the rat poison. She was too upset.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PUFFING and panting, the fat man was sitting on the bench in the avenue. On his knees he held two bulging boxes. A third, in rather a squashed condition, lay on the ground. Katya and her friends were running in various directions picking up the balls. Girls and boys from the nursery-school, children and their mothers and grandmothers, passers-by were all gathering up his balls and fetching them to him. And the fat man was counting: "Ninety-four, thank you. Ninety-five, thank you. Ninety-six, much obliged. Ninety-seven, can't get any more in. Ninety-eight, you'll have to hang on to that one for a bit. Ninety-nine," he continued sadly, "and there's nowhere to put it."

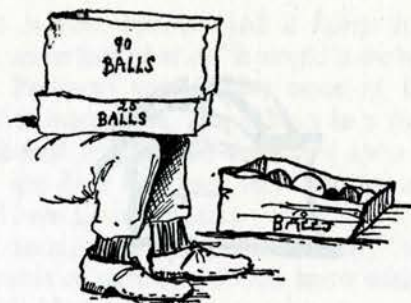
At this juncture, Tanya decided to take charge. She received the balls and passed them over to Katya, Shura, Lilia, the two other girls and the macaroni boy. The nursemaid deftly stuffed hers under the baby's blanket.

The fat man was beaming all over as he counted:

"One hundred and twenty-four, one hundred and twenty-five. That's the lot! . . . A hundred and twenty-six," he added, and suddenly stopped quite flabbergasted.

"And how many did you say there were?" asked Katya.

"A hundred and twenty-five. That's what's on the invoice." They were all very astonished and started counting the balls



all over again. There were indeed a hundred and twenty-six. Where on earth had the extra one come from? That was to remain a mystery. . . . The fat man replaced the lids on the boxes and planted them on his head. But what was to be done with the remaining balls—the ones he hadn't been able to get in?

"Have you got far to go?" enquired the nursemaid, all businesslike, stuffing back a ball which was sneaking its way out of the blanket.

"It's just over there," beamed the fat man. "Round the corner in that shop called 'The Children's World'."

And so the whole procession moved off in the direction of the department store which was indeed "round the corner"—though not the first one, but the seventh!

Katya was hugging her bag of oatmeal, one big ball and three small ones. She sighed bitterly as she thought of the slumbering Milka and the hungry rabbits. But however she was feeling at that moment, how would she have felt if she had only known that one of those rabbits was swiftly approaching her wrapped in an old tablecloth!

That, however, is what actually happened. Nadezhda Petrovna rushed towards them shaking the wrapped-up rabbit. She cut into the procession past all the loose balls and marched right into the thick of the "hooligans", elbowing

them all roughly aside, and then made off again, quicker than ever. Sinister thoughts were driving her on.

"It's all clear to me now," she mumbled to herself. "Medvedkina! That's who it is! All the neighbours are plotting against me. They all know that I simply can't stand animals and they've been deliberately pestering me with cats, dogs and rabbits. I'll get even with Medvedkina! I'll show her!"

She rushed into the courtyard. She was tormented by the thoughts that the Medvedkins were at that very moment having a good laugh at her expense. She decided to expose them once and for all, and stealing quietly up to the window of their flat, Nadezhda Petrovna started to eavesdrop.

The Medvedkins were indeed having a chat, but what they were saying had nothing whatsoever to do with her.

"... I think, perhaps, a cake..." Mrs. Medvedkina was saying.

"Yes, of course, a cake... with cream..." said her son, Sasha, a pupil at the college of Music.

"Well, I've got no objection," said Mr. Medvedkin. Mr. Medvedkin promised to send the cake with someone from the office, because he himself would not be able to get back home in time. The talk on this topic came to an end. For some reason or other Miss Petrovna was now more than ever convinced that it *was* Mrs. Medvedkina who had planted the rabbit in her flat.

A plan for revenge began to brew in her mind and she rushed into her flat as fast as her legs could carry her.

As soon as she got inside she took out of the cupboard a cake-box, a length of tape, some ribbon, bits of lace-trimming and some old gloves. She placed the rabbit inside the box, surrounded it with cotton-wool so that it shouldn't move about too much, made a little hole in one of the sides for ventilation and carefully tied up the box with the tape and ribbon.

"With cream!" she sniggered to herself.

Nadezhda Petrovna then waited a little while—long enough, according to her reckoning, for Mr. Medvedkin to go out and buy the cake and send it home from his office. Then

she muffled herself up in an old shawl, went downstairs and rung the Medvedkins' bell.

"From Mr. Medvedkin," she said in a disguised voice, and hiding her face. Her gloved hand thrust the cake-box through the door as it opened and then she ran quickly off.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MITYA found Volodya pumping a tyre at the back of a large shed. On the walls hung a bow, a quiver of arrows, a spare wheel and a toy pistol. The sun pierced a chink in the wall, and a beam fell on an old barrel full of green water; on the surface floated — as though on skis — a long-legged water-fly. In one corner stood a pair of roller-skates and a fishing rod; in another lay some hay. And in the roof space fluttered a few twittering sparrows.

"Oh, hullo, it's you!" said Volodya, delighted to see his friend. "This is my work-room. Jolly good, don't you think?" Mitya nodded and sighed with relief. There was certainly enough space for his entire menagerie here. And he proceeded to tell Volodya the whole story.

Volodya listened in silence and knit his brows.

"Well, how about it, you will take them, won't you?" Mitya asked, when his tale was ended. Volodya dropped his pump and stood up.

"Idiot!" he said.

"Why idiot?"

"Because you *are* an idiot, that's why."

Both boys were silent.

"You will take them, though, won't you?" Mitya's voice was rather subdued.

"Take what?"

"The animals."

Volodya fixed his friend with a devastating look.

"You're too late! I bet your animals have already vanished."



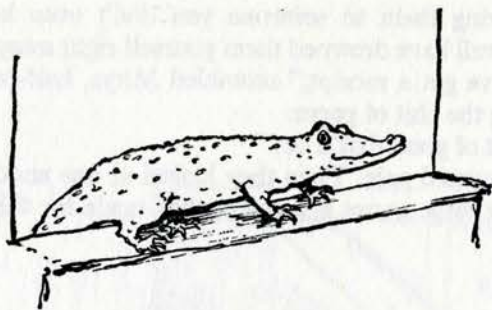
Fancy giving them to someone you don't even know! You might as well have drowned them yourself right away!"

"But I've got a receipt," mumbled Mitya, half-protestingly, producing the chit of paper.

"Fat lot of good that'll be!"

Mitya turned pale. Then they looked at one another, and as though by some secret agreement they made for the station.





CHAPTER FIFTEEN

FATHER had gone and the bath-tap was left running. Who could be bothered with taps when such things were going on in the house? And so the water in the bath kept rising and so did the crocodile with it, floating somewhat unsteadily on the surface. When he got high enough to reach the little soap shelf he swallowed the cake of IDEAL soap at one gulp and was about to turn his attention to a toothbrush when suddenly a small bird came and perched on the sill of the open window. The crocodile fixed it with its gaze and swam up closer. The bird blithely hopped along the sill. The water was now so high that the crocodile was able to crawl from the edge of the bath on to the window sill. The bird watched it curiously, tilting its head to one side. The crocodile continued to crawl along the sill.

"Quick march!" cried the bird, whisked its tail and flew up into the blue sky. And the crocodile crawled on to the outer ledge above the street.

Nadezhda Petrovna was standing by *her* window-sill washing her window. This was the twenty-third item on her list of things to be done. By her side was a washtub and a bucket of dirty water. She was feeling cheerful. She was rubbing the window pane with a piece of cloth and singing:

"The storm did howl and the rain fell fast
As in the gloom the light'ning flashed,
And the thunder rolled without a stop
As thro' the woods the winds did rage . . ."

At that very moment the crocodile crawled past her window. She let out a faint shriek, collapsed and toppled over her bucket. The cloth hurtled from her hand down into the street below.

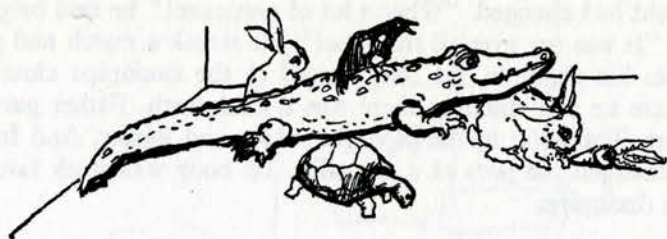
And, of course, it was bound to happen that just at that moment Katya's father, Mr. Pastushkov, his towel over his shoulder, should be slowly strolling along the street, still dazed by all the queer things that had happened to him. All





of a sudden something wet brushed lightly against his cheek. Mechanically raising his hand, he found himself clutching a wet cloth. He looked at it gloomily, then continued his stroll, cloth in hand. At the corner he halted, and thrust his other hand into his pocket to get out his cigarettes. And suddenly he felt his case of spare spectacles! He had found them at last! The sun began to shine! The trees looked greener. How blue the sky had become, and how cheerfully the birds were twittering and the children playing and shouting! Nothing in the

world had changed. "What a lot of nonsense!" he said brightly. "It was my eyes all the time!" He struck a match and put it to his cigarette. At that instant in the drainpipe close to where he was standing there was a loud crash. Father gave a start. The noise in the pipe got louder and louder. And from it emerged the jaws of a crocodile. Its body was stuck fast in the drainpipe.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HAVING handed in the balls to "The Children's World," Katya rushed home. She must feed the rabbits as soon as possible. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her. The others did not lag behind — Lilia, Tanya, Shura, two unknown girls, two strange boys, the nursemaid and baby, and finally the boy with the macaroni now finishing his seventh bread-ring. This time they managed to reach home without further incident.

And so they arrived in the courtyard. Two little girls in the middle of the yard were turning a skipping-rope. Nina Kommissarova was gaily jumping over the rope and the two turners were doing their utmost to make her miss. They turned the rope now high, now low, now fast, now slow, but there was nothing they could do. She skipped like clockwork.

"She's showing off," said someone. "Katya, you go and show her so's she doesn't give herself airs." But Katya didn't even bother to listen. Any other time, of course, she would have shown Nina Kommissarova how to skip properly. But not now . . .

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" they asked her.

"To look at the crocodile," answered the macaroni boy in a low voice. The girls gasped and joined the procession. The baby in the nursemaid's arms began to wail.

"Is there much farther to go?" asked nurse.

"No, that's our front-door, just over there," said Katya.

And suddenly from somewhere up a tree somebody cried

"Hullo!" The starling was perched on the branch of a maple tree. Katya stood stock still. At first she couldn't realise what had happened. Then she gave a low groan of fear.

"Public property," she whispered in the depths of despair. The baby continued to howl and the starling whisked its tail and disappeared into the sky. Sobbing bitterly, Katya rushed indoors.





CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MILKA was squatting by a bench, her empty doll's pram standing close by. She was placing the coloured ribbons on the bench and fitting them between the spaces. Each ribbon was a visitor and several had already arrived, Bolochka, Alex, Chicki, Fantail and Peter.

"Here comes another fish," murmured Milka, warmly welcoming it and sticking it on the bench — a goldfish. "How are you? I am well. Have some cake." She placed a screw in front of it. "Have some of my chocolate," she said to the guest of honour, Peter, and placed a piece of sealing-wax in front of it. "And now friends, let's have a game. Bags, I start!" And she began:

"Under the golden porch they sat
The Tsar and his Tsarina,
The Prince and Princess,
The cobbler and tailor,
And how about you?"

And she poked her finger at Fantail.

At that instant Katya dashed past, sobbing. Behind her rushed the girls, and then the nursemaid brandishing the baby.

Milka took fright. She pulled out her ribbons, began screaming loudly and dragging her pram after her, rushed to follow the others. They dashed past Father sitting on an old radiator near the front door and he, hearing all the noise, merely looked up and watched glumly as his two daughters and all those unknown people tore past him screaming and yelling.

"What a nightmare!" he sighed.

And not until the whole lot had got through the door did Father become really agitated. He sprang up and, waving his towel, followed the girls in hot pursuit, shouting: "Don't go inside!"



But the whole throng, tramping noisily, ran straight upstairs. On the second floor they nearly swept Grandmother off her feet as she was just coming back with her vegetables. Flashing past her, her eyes fairly bulging with fear, came Katya. And behind her, Milka, dragging her pram. And close on their heels Father with his towel. And then a whole crowd of complete strangers, tearing up as fast as they could. Grandmother did not lose her presence of mind.

"Dial nine-nine-nine and ask for the Fire Brigade," she shouted, and joined in the chase.

Katya was the first to burst into the flat. On the floor lay the shoe-box and the croquet-case. Both hutch and cage were empty. In the bath there was nothing but water, which flowed from the tap and ran out in a stream into the passage. Grandmother turned off the tap.

"The crocodile's gone," wailed Katya. They all crowded into the passage in silence.

"How ghastly!" muttered Father.

"She's been telling a lot of lies!" shouted the nursemaid indignantly. She gave the baby a spank and slammed the door.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WITH gathering speed the train came puffing out of Matushkin towards town. The telegraph wires, as always, rose and fell as they passed the compartment where Volodya and Mitya sat in a sort of sullen silence. All the way to the station and while they were waiting for the train, Volodya pestered Mitya and reduced him to a state where he thought he was guilty of having destroyed school pets.

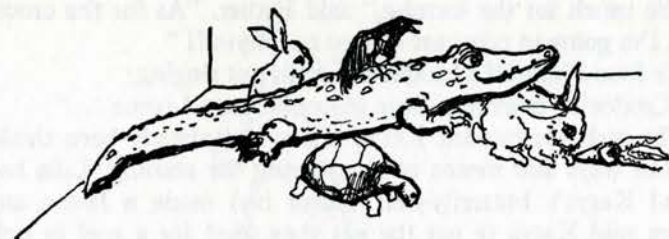
"What an idiot I've been!" he kept saying to himself with intense disgust. Volodya was looking at him and the train trundled rhythmically along. By now Volodya was getting a little calmer; his anger was leaving him. He felt that perhaps he had gone too far. After all, not every girl you didn't know was a good-for-nothing. And what indeed *could* happen to the animals in such a short time. He was now beginning to feel a bit sorry for Mitya. He said: "Do you know what? I know of a little creek down by the sea. If we could partition it off we could build a first-class swimming-pool for the crocodile. What do you think?"

Mitya looked at him. Did that mean there was still hope? "Oh, yes," he said, brightening up. He decided to try to find out from Volodya what he thought about the rabbits. "Do you

think?" he asked as casually as he could, "you'll be able to find a bit of pasture for the rabbits?"

"Ha!" said Volodya. "What next! Do you want me to get rid of my goat?"

And so, at last, with their minds at rest, the boys began to discuss what arrangements they could make in the country for the crocodile, the tortoise and the starling.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

DISSOLVED in tears, Katya looked at the empty cages. Around her in silence sat Father, Milka and Grandmother. They could offer neither help nor comfort to the poor girl. Father was the only one who was not downcast. As soon as he became aware of the *real* existence of the rabbits, the crocodile and the starling, all his worries vanished as though by magic. Everything was now perfectly clear.

"Enough tears," he said. "We are all going to take part in the search. And to start with we must first think where those rabbits could have got to."

Grandmother sighed and wrung her hands. "It's me, silly booby, that I am. I know where it is. It was all my doing . . . I must dash right away!" And out she ran on to the landing and disappeared.

"Excellent!" said Father. "So much for one rabbit. We must now figure out what could have become of the tortoise."

It was Milka's turn to break into tears. "I didn't know," she cried. "And then it bit me . . . And I exchanged it . . ."

"Exchanged it?" asked Father.

"Yes," she admitted. "For something jolly good. Look . . ." and she drew out of her pram the coloured ribbons, the screw and the sealing wax.

"Oh!" said Father. "Oh!"

"Well, go on then," cried the other girls, "go on then, go and change them back."

The child briskly gathered up her treasures and clasp them tightly, she made off as fast as her little legs could carry her.

"So much for the tortoise," said Father. "As for the crocodile, I'm going to take care of that one myself!"

He found himself a broom and went out singing:

"Crocodile, crocodile, little crocodile, here I come..."

The girls surrounded Katya. They had already been thinking out ways and means of recapturing the starling. Lilia had found Katya's butterfly-net. Tanya had made a lasso and Shura told Katya to get the net they used for a goal in net-ball. Then they all set off on the hunt. Puss was left all by himself. He gave himself a good lick, leaped unhurriedly on to the window sill and stalked off somewhere along the outside ledge.



CHAPTER TWENTY

NADEZHDA PETROVNA sat with bowed head, trembling with rage. There was a ring. She went to the door and opened the little peephole through which she always spied any arrivals at her home.

On the landing stood Grandma Pastushkova.

Nadezhda Petrovna opened the door.

"Sorry to trouble you," said Grandmother, somewhat embarrassed. "It's like this, you see..."

"You've just arrived at the right moment," said Miss Petrovna. "You can be a witness." She pulled Grandmother inside. "The Medvedkins are plotting to get rid of me. Look!"

And she showed the cabbage-head and the turnip to Grandmother.

"D'you see? They've purposely gone and left these things lying around to make me fall and get concussion of the brain!"

"That wasn't the Medvedkins," said Grandmother guiltily. "It was me."

"You! Impossible! Don't try to protect them!" She looked suspiciously at Grandmother.

"And the rabbit? Was that you too?"

"And the rabbit," confessed Grandmother.

Nadezhda Petrovna was almost choking with indignation.

"And who does the crocodile belong to?"

"It's Katya's."

"Out of my house!" screamed Miss Petrovna, pushing Grandma out and hurling the cabbage-head after her. "And that's the treatment I've given to your rabbit. And that's the treatment I'll give to anything that people stick in my house! You can tell that to anyone you please!" And she slammed the door in a fury.

Grandmother blinked and mechanically picked up the cabbage. She thought of Katya sobbing her eyes out, and she herself was nearly on the verge of tears. But then she began to feel angry and started to bang at Miss Petrovna's door.

"Impudent woman!" she shouted. "Evil-minded creature!"

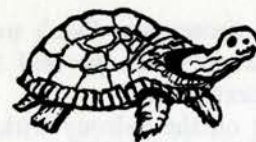
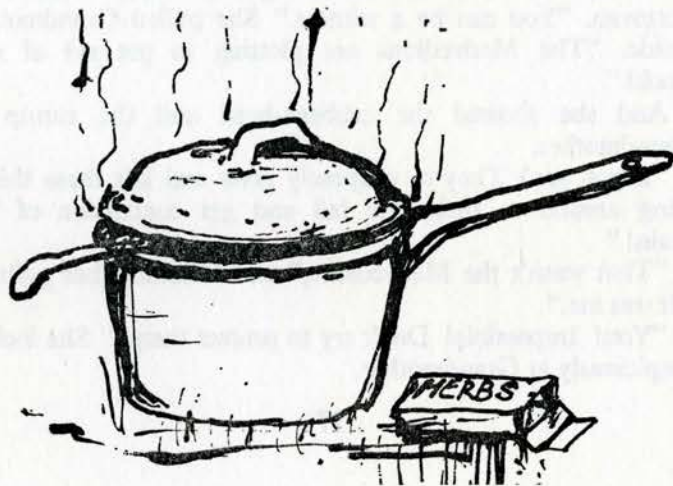
The door remained closed.

"She makes life impossible!" shouted gentle Grandma, banging the cabbage-head on the door.

"Give me that rabbit back, d'you hear! You'll come to no good, I tell you! I won't allow you to upset the poor child."

There was no reply.

And then, somewhat ashamed of her unruly behaviour, Grandmother started to weep and went back home. "She's probably stewed it, and eaten it for dinner, the unscrupulous woman!" said Grandmother, sobbing bitterly.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MILKA ran along the avenue with her treasures, looking for Lev, but she couldn't find him anywhere. But she did know that he lived in a house that had three courtyards and that is where she went.

In the first yard there was no sign of him... nor in the second. And from the third came such a piercing noise that Milka was afraid to go in.

Luckily just at that moment a postwoman, her satchel over her shoulder, was walking in that direction. Milka walked carefully behind her. In the third yard she saw Lev seated on a large pile of logs and playing a mouth-organ. She rushed up to him.

"Take these back and give us back our tortoise!" she cried.

Lev went on playing some indescribable tune. He paused to say: "Your tortoise? I've changed it for this mouth-organ."

"You had no right to; it belongs to school."

"Crikey!" said Lev. "But why didn't you come before?"

"I've been at home," said Milka, and went on to tell him that Katya had other school animals, and that all of them had somehow or other disappeared.

"You're in a bad spot," said Lev. "Do you know what you can get for losing school property?"

"No."

"They send you to prison."

Milka blinked.

"It looks as though you're going to need a bit of help. You can thank your lucky stars that you've got me."

"Oh, thanks awfully!" said Milka. Then she clasped her hands and gasped.

"But I haven't got your screw. I've had it all the time but now..."

"Oh never mind about that. Don't worry," said Lev magnanimously. "Come on. Let's go and find Gene." And off they went into the next yard.

Gene was sitting on the balcony with a book on his knees but he wasn't reading. He had, it seemed, seized himself by his hair and was pulling it upwards! And he was laughing helplessly.

Lev called to him: "Go and fetch that tortoise."

Gene leaned over the balcony and replied, choking with laughter: "D'you realise? He actually lifted himself out of the bog by his hair! And his horse, too! D'you understand?"

"Give us back that tortoise," ordered Lev.

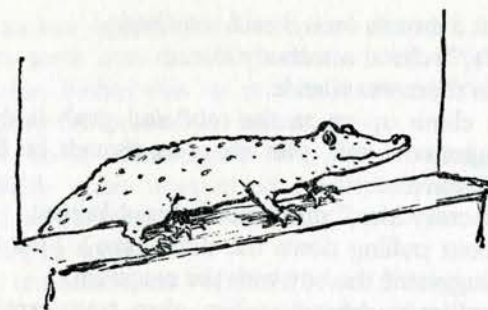
"And what should I want a tortoise for?" demanded Gene. "I swapped it with Valya for a copy of Baron Munchausen's Tales. Did you know that the Baron shot himself into the air on a cannon-ball and jumped from that one on to another?"

Gene again burst into a peal of laughter. But Milka was crying and Lev explained very seriously why they *had* to have the tortoise back. He threw back the mouth organ.

Gene's face clouded.

"Listen, little girl," he said. "I've only got seven pages left to read. Will you please let me finish and then . . ."

But Lev said firmly: "No, you can't!" And off they went to Valya's.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THERE was a large crowd at the corner. Everybody goggled at the crocodile's jaws protruding from the drainpipe. What on earth (everyone wondered) was an African crocodile doing in a domestic drainpipe. How did it get in and how was it going to be got out? One citizen declared that it must have escaped from the Zoo and was hiding from its pursuers. Another maintained that it had fallen from an aeroplane. Others reckoned that they were going to shoot a film, and that they'd put the crocodile there a little earlier so's he could get used to it. But the caretaker thought that was all a lot of nonsense. It wasn't a crocodile at all but simply someone playing the fool. Little boys in the crowd kept offering the animal bits of stick and wire and screamed with delight when it snapped its jaws. The only one to remain unastonished was the boy with the macaroni. He stood very close to the pipe and stared enraptured at the crocodile which, at long last, had become reality. With some difficulty Father cleared a way through the crowd and finally found himself close enough to the drainpipe.

"Now we'll get it out," he said in business-like tones, and waved the broom in front of the crocodile's muzzle.

The animal snapped its jaws.

"Come on, out you come!"

The animal did not budge.

Father scratched his head and leaned on his broom. The rest of the crowd was also deep in thought.

"Let's put a muzzle on it," said somebody.

"Yes, let's," echoed somebody else.

And again there was silence.

"Let me climb up on to the roof and push it down from above," suggested a tall, thin chap, as though he had had a sudden brainwave.

"That's a crazy idea," muttered the yard-keeper.

"How about pulling down the drain-pipe? That should do the trick," suggested the boy with the macaroni.

Father suddenly glanced at him, then transferred his gaze to the string on which dangled his ring-shaped bread-rolls.

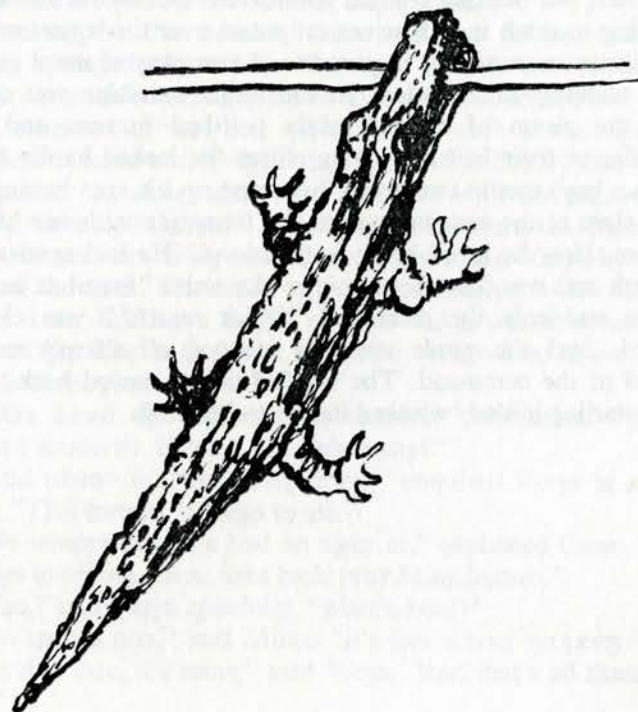
"Hand me a roll or two," he said thoughtfully. The lad complied. Father threaded them on to the broomstick. Then holding the stick at both ends he raised it to the crocodile's jaws.

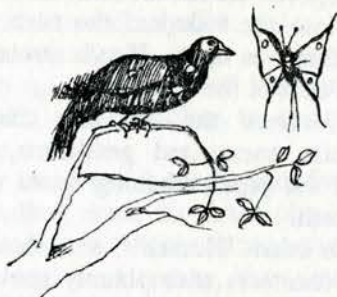


The monster opened its mouth and closed it with a bang, sinking its teeth into the rolls and the stick. Everybody then realised what Father was up to. Hands stretched out from all sides to grasp the ends of the broom.

"Heave ho!" ordered the tall, thin chap and everyone pulled. With quite unexpected gentleness, the animal slid down and out of the pipe and hung on to the stick without unclenching its teeth.

All the children cried "Hurrah!" and Father, the macaroni boy and a few volunteers triumphantly started walking away with the stick and the clinging crocodile. Behind them followed the rest of the crowd. People's heads popped out from every window to gaze at this unusual spectacle. It was like being in a box at the theatre, but this was more interesting because they don't show you crocodiles in the theatre!





CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FLYING over the yard and perching itself on a roof among the pigeons, our starling spotted a butterfly and set off in chase. Failing to catch it, it flew out on patrol over the square where a military exercise was in progress. A company of naval cadets was standing at attention. In the bright sunshine you could see the gleam of their brightly polished buttons and the buckles of their belts. A young officer (he looked hardly more than a boy) was in command. Screwing up his eyes because of the glare of the sun, he took in the formation with one happy glance. How he loved being in command! He had opened his mouth and was just about to give the order "Stand at ease!" when suddenly the command "Quick march!" was clearly heard. And the whole company stepped off sharply to the word of the command. The startled officer moved back. And our starling blithely whisked its tail and flew off.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MILKA, Lev and Gene went along to Varya's, Gene trying to finish his book as he walked; he plodded along at a snail's pace, stumbling against trees and stones.

From the opposite direction came the procession with the famous crocodile hanging from the broomstick. Gene nearly bumped into it but was too interested in his story even to give it a glance; he was just on the last page. Lev, on the other hand, stood stock still, his mouth wide open.

"Where are you off to?" Father asked Milka.

"Looking for the tortoise," answered Lev on her behalf, looking apologetically at him. He would liked to have stopped to talk about the crocodile, but at that point Gene finished the book, slammed it shut and rushed off at such a mad speed that he was soon out of sight. Lev grabbed Milka by the arm and pulled her along after him. The boy with the macaroni quietly detached himself from the crowd surrounding the crocodile and tore along after them. They found Varya by the bank of the river. The lanky lad was standing up to his knees in the water holding a length of rope which was attached to the tortoise. The animal was swimming somewhere about the middle of the river.

Milka flared up. "That's our tortoise!" she cried. "You mustn't drown it! Fetch it out right away!"

"And where did you spring from?" enquired Varya in surprise. "This tortoise belongs to me."

"We swapped but we had no right to," explained Gene. "It belongs to school. Here, take back your Munchausen."

"Hm," said Varya spitefully, "what school?"

"No special one," said Milka, "it's just school property."

"In that case, it's mine," said Varya, "and that's all there is to it."

He turned his back on them and began tugging at the rope, thereby making the tortoise dive.

"Now he certainly won't give it back," said Gene, looking worried. "I know him!"

"You just wait," declared Lev. "Come on! Give it back!"

He went close up to Varya.

"Well!" he said, "you've had long enough. Pull in that rope. Do you hear?"

"And does this rope happen to be yours?" asked Varya maliciously. "I'll pull it in just when I please."

"We've already told you. The tortoise is school property!" said Lev furiously.

"It *was*!" said Varya, and started to whistle.

Such effrontery was a little too much for Lev. He struck Varya on the head and a struggle began. Varya was tall and wiry and things would have gone badly for Lev if Milka



hadn't come running up just then and furiously pulled Varya's hair. He gave a bellow and allowed the rope to slip from his hands. The end of it trailed for a little while on the surface, and then disappeared beneath the water. And in the middle of the river the tortoise could just about be seen above the water. It gave a little plunge and was no longer visible. Milka started to scream and the boys were struck dumb.

"Here, hold this!" suddenly came the voice of the macaroni boy, and thrust his bag into Milka's hand. He made a dash and plunged into the water.





CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE girls were walking along the avenue scattering crumbs and crying: "Tweet! Tweet! Tweet!"

And blackbirds, pigeons and sparrows came flying down towards them. Once even a small black cat came running up, but there was no sign of the starling.

"It'll soon be along," said the girls, trying hard to comfort the sobbing Katya. But the starling did not appear.

"Well, it's no good like this," said Tanya at last. "We'll have to stick up a notice."

She ran up to a student sitting under a linden tree solving a mathematical problem, and asked him for a sheet of paper. While he was tearing it out of his exercise book she managed to explain the situation to him, and the student kindly lent her a big pencil that wrote in blue and red.

Tanya wrote in large red and blue letters:



Then they hung the notice up on the biggest tree they could find in the avenue.

Then they continued to run for a while until Lilia said: "We'll only wear ourselves out running like this. We'd better split up and go and look in different places."

"Who goes where?" asked Shura.

"I'll take charge," announced Tanya. "First let's draw lots. Right, Katya?"

Katya merely nodded. She was ready to agree to anything provided the starling was found. Tanya tore a ticket up into four pieces (the one she had left from the cinema) and on each piece she wrote something down and then tied them up in the corners of her handkerchief.

"Now!" she said, throwing her handkerchief up in the air.

"Catch! Each one of you grab a corner!"

The girls snatched at the four corners. Then they untied the knots.

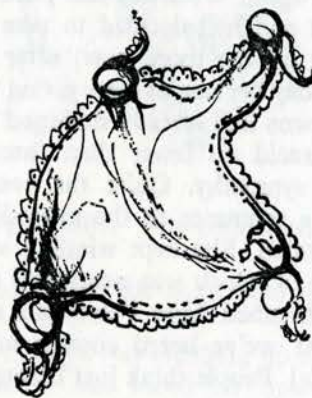
"Avenue for me!" said Shura.

"Yards for me!" cried Lilia. "Worse luck!"

"Park for me!" said Katya sadly.

"And for me the hardest! S. and F., Square and Fountain!" announced Tanya and added confidently, "Never mind, we'll find it somehow."

And so the girls split up.





CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

POOR Katya made her way down the little path through the park. She had no hope whatever of finding anything. Suddenly she noticed a little bird, black with white spots. It was perched on a shrub by a summer house, lightheartedly cleaning its wing. With bated breath Katya raised her net and holding it firmly with both hands she started to sneak up to it.

Now behind this same shrub, on a green bench, sat Nadezhda Petrovna and the nursemaid and baby. On Miss Petrovna's knees was a bottle bearing a skull and crossbones and marked Rat Poison. With this last purchase she had now completed her list and had decided to take a little rest. She felt she needed it all the more now; after all the upsetting experiences of the day her nerves were giving way.

Nadezhda Petrovna had already managed to tell her tale of woe to the nursemaid no fewer than three times. But she didn't get much sympathy. Quite the contrary: when the nursemaid heard a reference to the crocodile she seemed to get extremely irritated. She kept winding some string round her boot, the sole of which was nearly off as a result of her wanderings. She brushed Miss Petrovna's stories aside muttering: "All right! we've heard enough tales. We all know about the crocodile! People think just because you come from a village they can . . ."

"Stop mumbling!" growled Nadezhda Petrovna, not paying any attention to what she was saying.

"First there was the cabbage . . ." she said, straightening one finger.

The nursemaid grunted distrustfully.

"Then the rabbit . . ." With a vindictive smile, Nadezhda Petrovna straightened her second finger. The nursemaid, without uttering a word in reply, kept tapping the sole of her boot with a stone to show she was no longer going to be fooled by any stories about rabbits.



"And then the crocodile!" she concluded, straightening her third finger.

"A pack of lies!" cried the nursemaid with great indignation.

At that moment Katya was creeping up closer. The starling had not flown away. She stood on tiptoe, raised her net and . . .

"... And always on *my* head..." Nadezhda Petrovna was saying. And right on top of her head swooped the starling and on *its* head came the net with a terrific swing.

The nursemaid sprang to her feet and saw the very girl! the same, lying, deceitful girl!

Almost blind with rage she grabbed at the child, seizing her head.

Miss Petrovna, still anticipating further intrigues from all her enemies, gallantly dashed forward. The net flew from Katya's hands... She recognised Miss Petrovna's jacket.

She started to babble: "Dr... dr... dreadfully sorry!" and darted away as fast as her legs could carry her. Miss Petrovna turned swiftly and through the meshes of the net she saw the escaping Katya. It was perfectly clear to her: the plot was continuing...

The rat poison lay scattered on the gravel path...



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

KATYA walked on, her head bent, sobbing bitterly, leaving little drops in her path that made it look as though it had been raining.

There was nothing to be done. Best go home. She went up the stairs, half running, half dragging her feet. One moment she would hope that somehow all the animals had turned up and were waiting for her at home. The next moment she would pause scared of discovering that, as before, there was still no trace of them.

At home there was only the crocodile. Katya glanced at it and then turned away. Grandmother tried not to look at her—she was afraid she might burst into tears. Katya went and huddled on a corner of the divan and waited in terror for the doorbell to ring. And ring it did. Long, loud and piercing. But she dared not go and open it. Grandmother went.

Milka burst into the room with the macaroni boy — Milka panting after her chase and the lad quite dry after his bathe. The tortoise was with them! Katya laughed for joy. For a moment it seemed that things were not so bad after all. But only for a moment. Neither the rabbits nor the starling had turned up yet.

"The crocodile is the most important," said Father calmly. "You can always get hold of a rabbit or a starling."

"Yes, of course," agreed the macaroni boy gloomily.

"And now we'll phone the Zoo to see whether *they've* got the rabbits."

"They won't be there," said the lad.

"That's what we are going to find out," replied Father lifting the receiver.

Puss, returning from a long walk, looked lazily in through

the window from the outside ledge. Suddenly it bent its head, its whiskers twitched greedily and with an immense leap it hurtled into the room past Father, nearly knocking him off his feet, and flung itself into the cupboard.

Father gave a start.

"What, you again!" he exclaimed. Puss disappeared inside the cupboard and a terrific racket ensued. The door swung open, out flew a white ball, rolled on the floor and separated out into cat and rabbit.

"Ah!" screamed Katya, and pressed the rabbit tight in her arms. But then she suddenly grew scared in case she might damage it and so she put it in the hutch.

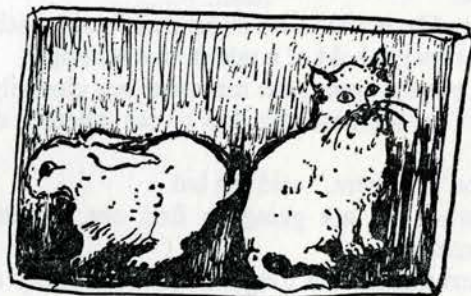
"Now what do you say to that!" beamed Grandmother. "That is most certainly my rabbit."

"I beg your pardon," objected Father, to whom something else was now becoming clearer, "it's *my* rabbit."

But whether it was his or Grandma's, it was certainly time to give it something to eat. Katya poured out a quantity of oatmeal and Grandmother brought some cabbage leaves in from the kitchen.

Katya and the macaroni boy squatted down by the hutch and the boy treated it to a few strings of macaroni.

"Well, that's what I call fine!" beamed Father. "Now we shan't have to buy two rabbits. Only one."



Grandmother started bustling around, opening all the cupboards and drawers in the flat. But *her* rabbit was not to be found. And Puss, having once again realised that it hadn't caught a mouse, got moody and went out through the window.

Then there was a ring, a very gentle one—though to Katya's ears it sounded more like a rumble of thunder.

"It's too late," she whispered to herself, "this must be him." And she clasped her hands very tightly together. She stood up. She could already see Mitya coming in holding the dreaded receipt in his hands with the fateful words:

I promise to return safe and unharmed the school property given to me for safekeeping.

She clenched her fists and whispered: "I have *not* protected the school property."

There was another ring. Grandma rushed towards Katya.

"It was all my fault, silly ninny that I am. Don't cry, Katya dear, I will tell him myself . . ."

Shaking his head and sighing Father went to the front door. Milka crept under the bed in terror.

"Where are *you* off to?" asked the macaroni boy, but she made no reply.

Father opened the door.

"Ah it's you, Sasha," he said happily. "Well done! Sasha Medvedkin!"

Sasha, neat and tidy, came in and rubbed his shoes on the mat. Then he cleared his throat and said in almost a whisper:

"Very many thanks. From Mother. And from Father. And from me."

"You haven't pipped your exam?" asked Mr Pastushkov.

"No! I got Excellent!" he beamed in reply. "For the double-stringed notes and the Kreutzer exercises. That's because you made me practise them three hours every day!"

"Well, well," said Father. "Let me congratulate my pupil of the College of Music and the future first violin of our Philharmonic Orchestra!"

They all laughed.

"Thank you," said Sasha. "Mother, Father and I would be very happy if you would accept this modest . . . er . . . er . . . with cream!"

And from behind his back he pulled out a large cake-box.

"Well, well my boy," said Father, rather embarrassed.

Sasha thrust the box into Father's hands and ran out through the door still shouting from the stairs: "Thank you very much!"

Father came back into the room where the others were sitting in silence.

"You never know who is likely to turn up," he said gaily. "Meanwhile, let's have a few plates and a large knife."

"And some for me, over here," announced Milka, from under the bed.



Grandmother quickly set out some plates and Father cut the tape and raised the lid.

Out of the box, complete with cotton-wool, sprang a white rabbit—right on to the table-cloth.

"I don't believe it," said Father, and sat down, nearly missing the chair.





CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

HAVING swallowed a few worms, our starling felt thirsty. From up aloft it spied a fountain, and down it flew to perch itself on the head of the marble bather who, for seven years, had vainly been trying to dive into the water.

"Hullo!" chirped the starling gaily.

Now this was definitely something it should *not* have done.

"That's the one! It talks! That's the one the notice is about! Catch it! Catch it!" came shouts from all directions. The girls set up a whoop of delight. A whole crowd of people made a mad rush for the fountain. Our frightened starling whisked its tail and flew up over the square without having managed to quench its thirst. And after it, stamping and fingers pointing, came children and grown-ups, running and shouting.

The bird just managed to find a quiet spot on the branch of a tree in the middle of a yard. The yard-keeper had only just finished his daily watering and small puddles, illuminated by the rays of the setting sun, sparkled among the flagstones. The bird swooped down and perched on the stones. It had scarcely managed to moisten its beak when there was a terrific yelping and yapping and a small puppy came tearing along at full speed. The starling got away just in time. It started to dart in and out among the roof tops and settled down at last on the highest television aerial. Only there did it feel completely safe and once more it was assailed by the pangs of thirst. In the groove of the roof the starling caught sight of a little rusty water and down it fluttered again.

And here it was that it was seen by Grandmother's white cat as it strolled along the roof. It hadn't read the notice, but

it, too, was on the look-out for the starling. Up it sneaked and gave a spring. The starling darted away. A paw with outstretched claws grazed its tail... It swooped forward like an arrow and flew into the first open window.

So once more Puss was unlucky, its prey had given it the slip. Trying hard to maintain its dignity, the cat sloped off.





CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

"Now just a moment," said Father, "let's get this straight. There must be a strictly scientific explanation for everything. In the first place, is this *the* rabbit?"

"Yes, that's the one," cried Katya. Her heart was feeling considerably lighter. Now only the starling was missing. Milka was quietly playing with the rabbits.

"You can be a hare," she was saying to one, "and you can be a white bear," to the other.

"In the second place," continued Father, "we've got to find out how your rabbit got into the pastry-shop."

"I once ate an elephant made of chocolate cream," put in the macaroni boy suddenly, apropos of nothing in particular.

"No," remarked Grandmother, "you can think what you like but I certainly didn't leave it there."

"Whether you did or whether you didn't, nothing would surprise me now. Even if the starling were to fly in here this very moment complete with top hat and walking-stick," said Father.

There was a ring at the door.

"What did I tell you," asked Father, "there it is now with hat and stick."

Grandmother went to open the door while Katya listened anxiously.

"Is Katherine Pastushkova in?" It was Mitya's voice. Katya began to tremble and Milka again sought refuge under the bed. As she saw the two boys come in through the door-

way, Katya felt her mouth was too parched to greet them. She didn't have the strength to say "Hullo".

"Hullo" came from behind her back. She spun round; there in its cage was the starling. It was fluttering its wings over the water, and splashing all over the place.

"Hullo, boys!" said Katya in clear, ringing tones.

The boys anxiously switched their gaze from the tortoise to the rabbits, from the rabbits to the crocodile, and from the crocodile to the starling.

Then they smiled.

"Hullo," they replied politely, and in unison.

Father was sitting on the divan immensely enjoying the situation.

"I hope our animals haven't been too much trouble," Mitya enquired rather formally.

"No, of course not! Not at all!" everybody answered at once and Father added: "If ever you need to leave... say



... an elephant, for example, or a tiger or ... well, don't hesitate. They'll all be welcome."

Mitya drew out the receipt, very business-like. He read: "Angora rabbits—two."

"Right," cried Katya clearly and handed the hutch to Volodya.

"European tortoise—one."

"One," said Katya and Milka together.

"Bulgarian talking starling—one."

Milka could not repeat that one.



Volodya covered the cage with a handkerchief.

"And finally the crocodile. That's the lot," concluded Mitya and pushed down the lid of the croquet-case.

"You should have seen it in the drainpipe," said the macaroni boy suddenly with a laugh, and nearly ruined everything.

"O.K. then, that's fine!" put in Father hastily, signalling to him to be quiet, and the boy lapsed into silence.

Mitya and Volodya went up to Katya and each in turn shook her hand. Then they bowed to Father, to Grandmother and even to Milka.

"Goodbye," they said.

Just then the cat appeared at the window.

"Not taking him?" asked Father pointing to Puss.

"No, not the cat," replied the boys seriously.

Then the bell rang again.

"Very interesting," said Father. "Wonder who it can be this time. This has certainly been a day for callers."

He opened the door and there stood Alexander Ivanovitch Medvedkin, holding an enormous cake-box in his hands.

"Now look here," said Father, taking him by the lapel of his jacket. "Tell me the truth. How did you get our rabbit?"

"What rabbit?" asked Medvedkin. Father looked intently into his honest, wondering eyes and realised that Medvedkin really knew nothing whatsoever about the rabbit. And that was a fact. Having been run off his feet with work at the office, Medvedkin hadn't sent the cake home. And when he did get back, neither his wife or his son were in the house; they had gone to the cinema. So he himself took the cake to the Pastushkovs. It was clear that he knew nothing about the rabbit and this applied to the rest of his family.

"It's a good thing, all the same, that there are still some mysteries left in this world," said Father, closing the door after Medvedkin.

He strode back into the room and declared: "And now, if this is really and truly a cake and not an electric eel or a wolf-cub, we are going to eat it now."

Grandmother made everyone sit down at the table.

Father armed himself with a knife, but before cutting the ribbon he bent over the box and listened carefully. Inside all was peaceful. He then carefully cut the ribbon and raised the lid. Inside was a beautiful cream cake decorated with yellow roses and lovely chocolate fishes.

"Well, I think I'll be off now," observed the macaroni boy suddenly, quite out of the blue, and to everybody's great surprise. They tried to persuade him to stay.

"No!" said the lad firmly, picking up his bag. "Mother told me to be back home in ten minutes with the macaroni. I think I've been a bit longer than that."

He glanced out of the window.

Along the street the lamps were beginning to light up.



**The story is set in a modern
Russian town.**

When Katya offers to look after a baby crocodile, two angora rabbits, a tortoise and a talking starling for a few hours while a more permanent home is found for them, she does not know what is in store for her. Her young sister sets them free and the fun begins. What happens to each animal and how each return safely just in time will delight children of all ages.

Katya and the Crocodile was recently shown on BBC television in the "Stories from Europe" series.